

CHAPTER 4

Creating a Fit: Socializing Writers into the Community

This is to verify that Jenny Jones served as Development Director at Job Resource Center (JRC) from February 18, 1992 to July 31, 1992. . . . Unfortunately, funding for the Development Director position was not extended and we have not filled the position since.

THIS IS THE BEGINNING of a letter that conveys more by what is *not* said than by what is said. Jenny Jones was terminated from JRC after 4 months on the job for failure to fulfill the duties of her position successfully. Although neither Jenny nor those who supervised and worked with her would be likely to think of the problem in terms of the process of socialization into a discourse community, I argue that Jenny's situation was a case of her failure to learn the social dynamics shaping the discourse community at JRC. What emerges from the comments of community insiders who worked with Jenny is a picture of someone who chose to remain at arm's length from the discourse community. This distance—and the associated behaviors—inevitably led to her termination. Here is what her co-workers and bosses said:

That was one of the complaints about her interpersonal skills . . . she didn't talk face-to-face with people. She did a lot of memo writing. (Ursula, 8/11/92, p. 3)

She did not learn from people. (Leong, 9/15/92, p. 19)

I think the weakness in her writing is she couldn't learn. She's not willing to ask, and she's not willing to be told. . . . *She really didn't allow herself to socialize to learn. I think that was the problem.* I didn't think it was her grammar or anything like that. (Mei, 10/20/92, p. 31, emphasis added)

We don't know the reasons for Jenny's distance from her colleagues, for her working in isolation. But we can see the effects: She did not learn JRC's programs well enough to write about them accurately and authoritatively; she did not learn about the needs of JRC's partners—the overlapping discourse communities of private and corporate foundations she was asked to communicate with; she did not study and master the genres used in JRC's discourse community (letters of intent, proposals, PR materials); she did not pick up on the preferred method of communication within JRC: face-to-face conversation. By not adapting to several discourse communities, Jenny failed as a writer and as development director at JRC.

We have seen the complex array of expectations and norms of overlapping discourse communities affecting the writers at JRC. Assuming a willingness to learn, how do individual writers master the knowledge and skills specific to any or all of the discourse communities they must participate in? What hinders or helps the process of socialization into new discourse communities? These are the questions that guide the discussion of the data in this chapter. But first, the distinct categories of knowledge that were necessary for expert writing performance at JRC, in addition to discourse community knowledge, must be delineated.

KNOWLEDGE DOMAINS FROM WHICH EXPERT WRITERS DRAW

In Chapter 1, I pointed out the usual categories of knowledge that psychologists assign when studying learning—declarative versus procedural knowledge, or general versus local knowledge—as well as debates in composition studies concerning the knowledge and skills associated with expert writing performance. In studying the writers at JRC, who included newcomer and old-timer, novice and expert, I observed five domains of context-specific knowledge critical to full participation in the community: discourse community knowledge, subject matter knowledge, genre knowledge, rhetorical knowledge, and process knowledge. The domains, both overlapping and distinct, existed in a kind of symbiotic relation to

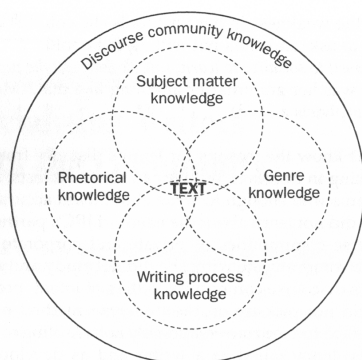


Figure 4.1. Five context-specific knowledge domains for writing expertise.

each other, as depicted in Figure 4.1. Each of these knowledge domains also represented a continuum from general knowledge to more context-specific knowledge. Becoming expert within the community, handling the most difficult and important writing tasks, involved a movement from more general knowledge brought from other contexts to increasingly context-specific knowledge and expertise unique to JRC. But first, I will describe the five domains of knowledge the writers in this study drew on.

Discourse Community Knowledge

As we saw in Chapter 3, JRC as a discourse community shared some writing practices in common with overlapping communities—federal and city funding agencies, philanthropic foundations, and businesses. To be successful, the writer had to grasp the complexity and variety of each discourse community she needed to interact with.

For example, we have seen Selma and Pam learning that norms for a grant proposal to a federal agency differ from those for a grant proposal to a local government agency because of differing goals and processes for communications. Birgitte, over time, refined her methods for approaching foundations and communicating with them orally and in writing; Ursula gained a great deal of knowledge about matters of decorum and social

rank that infused writing practices in the business community; and Pam wrestled with norms for communicating internally at JRC.

Subject Matter Knowledge

When Pam came to JRC, she had no experience in vocational training, adult literacy training, or grantsmanship; her academic background was in linguistics and anthropology. Within 4 months at JRC, she found herself in charge of the workplace literacy program.

ANNE: How much did you know about workplace literacy before?

PAM: Zero. [chuckles]

ANNE: So what have been the sources for you to learn about all this stuff?

PAM: Reading proposals, so I know what we specifically are about, and then all the literature that comes out from the National Workplace Literacy program. Things about what other programs do.

ANNE: Do they publish regularly?

PAM: Well, there's like two books I'm referring to. When I say all the literature [laughs] it's like nothing. Nothing! [laughs] And they're little pamphlets. It's just, "This is what they're doing in Arkansas. This is what they're doing in Wisconsin." . . . *Most of it's from talking to people.* (9/22/92, pp. 2–3, emphasis added)

So Pam was faced with two challenges: Not only did she need to learn about a subject area new to her, but the information was largely in oral form or diffused nationwide. She focused on learning the basics of the day-to-day operations of a workplace literacy program. The instructors who delivered the program, who were trained in ESL, had greater depth of knowledge, and Pam drew on their expertise for a deeper level of understanding to analyze training results or write a proposal for a new training program.

Pam also had to learn financial concepts such as "indirect costs" and "leveraging" funds. In October, she attended a workshop on proposal writing, which began to fill in some gaps in her knowledge. After that workshop and a year of working with Mei on budgets, Pam had sufficient background knowledge to put together a program budget on her own.

Selma faced a situation similar to Pam's when she came to JRC. She had an academic background in Near Eastern studies and had worked for an Israeli travel agency prior to JRC; she also had to learn about ESL and vocational training. After several years as an administrative assistant

at JRC, during which she absorbed a lot of information about JRC'S programs, she became program director for the clerical and medical-assistant training programs and learned the intricacies of government training programs funded through the Private Industry Council and the U.S. Department of Labor.

Pam and Selma also talked about the depth of subject matter knowledge required to actually put one's own ideas in a proposal rather than recycle old ideas. Only after 2 years of writing proposals for various training programs and another 3 years before that being on the periphery of the proposal-writing process was Selma willing to put her own ideas into a proposal. After a year of working with workplace literacy programs, Pam said, "Maybe someday I'd like to get to that stage, you know, when I'm not just taking other people's ideas" (8/5/93, p. 5).

Because she wrote publicity for all the programs, Ursula needed to know something about each of the five programs JRC ran. She explained the importance of that knowledge in commenting about a fact sheet she edited when new on the job:

I really didn't know much about the organization. . . . I just used a lot of their language that I hate now—it was all over the place. But I didn't want to go too far out of the bounds, 'cause I didn't know anything yet. *Now that I know more about all these programs I've written many things about [them] and I used a whole different way of describing them 'cause I understand them.* (8/5/93, pp. 6–7, emphasis added)

Ursula was a stickler for conciseness and precision in word choice. But until she understood the subject matter and the lingo, she was unable to utilize fully her skills as a writer and editor. With specific knowledge of JRC's vocational and literacy training programs, she could use jargon skillfully and also choose when *not* to use jargon.

Birgitte ran two programs at JRC: one to build kids' computer and literacy skills, and the other to help unemployed adults start their own small businesses. Her academic training and work experience prior to JRC were in political science and public policy. As she and Leong were starting to talk to foundations about their idea for the kids' program, she went to a Foxfire training program to gain background in ways of tapping kids' home and community knowledge to build literacy. She also started talking to principals and teachers at elementary schools in the city about after-school programs, slowly building her knowledge base about literacy and after-school programs. At the same time, she recruited Gilda, who was already working on self-employment training for low-income indi-

viduals. By working with Gilda, Birgitte developed her own knowledge of small business programs.

For all four writers at JRC, subject matter knowledge was a necessity for handling writing tasks successfully. Means for acquiring that knowledge in a workplace setting included library research, talking with subject matter experts, reading, and observing.

Genre Knowledge

The genres on which most of JRC's business depended were the grant proposal, the business letter, and the report. No writer had to master every genre, but each writer had to master several in order to function effectively. Furthermore, genre knowledge and discourse community knowledge were integrally linked; for example, as Chapter 3 illustrated, the grant proposal took different forms and varied in length and purpose depending on the discourse community addressed. Reports and business letters also varied depending on the context of the communication. And each of these genres spawned subgenres with more specific characteristics than the main genre.

Pam's introduction to the federal grant proposal—within a few months of her starting to work at JRC—is a good example of what can be a long road to genre mastery. Her first assignment was to draft several sections of a proposal that would end up totaling over 100 pages. The professional grant writer, Donald, wrote most of the text and edited Pam's portion. Here is *her* report of the writing process:

I wrote one section of the proposal, and it was . . . really hard because it was such a deadline and such pressure to it. It was the first time I'd ever done it, so *I just wrote everything out there, and I just said, "Well, you guys fix it."* So they did, and they cut and redid it. (Pam, 7/14/92, p. 2, emphasis added)

According to Donald:

She took on doing some of the pieces of the plan of operation. . . . She wrote well, but she tended to write quite—let's see. It was real wordy. It was real voluminous. It wasn't . . . tight enough. . . . I'm sure she was looking at the lingo in these things and then sort of trying to emulate it, which is, I think, based on my own experience in learning how to write these things, that's . . . what I did too . . . *sort of trying to imitate another grant, and not really quite understanding that there is a kind of a deeper level that's going on there. . . . She was . . .*

sort of throwing everything in—the kitchen sink, and . . . not being able to filter out. . . . “Maybe I’ll just mystify them and bury them in an avalanche of data and planning-sounding language, then they’ll just give us the money.” (Donald, 2/25/93, pp. 3–4, emphasis added)

On the heels of contributing to this federal proposal, Pam assumed most of the responsibility for a smaller but very similar grant proposal to the city, which was touched on in Chapter 3. Here’s her description of trying to accomplish that writing task:

I think the hard thing for me is that some of the things that I would say in one section I would also say in another section, so I tried to figure out, . . . should I really bang them over the head with this need in this section, or do it in another section. And then what I usually end up doing is writing everything on everything, and then later I go back and compare it with the RFP and see if it really goes there or if I should just ax it. (Pam, 7/14/92, p. 5)

Her understanding of the genre of the grant proposal at this point can be characterized as surface knowledge.

Four months later, in November, she had an opportunity to attend a 3-day workshop on grant writing for nonprofit organizations. On the one hand, she realized that she’d already assimilated a lot of information on the genre of the grant proposal as she’d worked with Mei. On the other hand, the information at the workshop took her to a deeper level of understanding, not just of financial terms, but of the genre itself: “It was like [the instructor] was naming all the things that I had observed Donald and Mei doing, so . . . she sorta demystified what it was that we had been doing already” (11/10/92, pp. 1–6, emphasis added). Pam commented several months after attending that workshop:

I’m one of these people who needs to see the overview, so that I can understand what I’m doing at each part. . . . I didn’t know what I was doing when I was writing those first [proposals]. . . . After that class I had a sense of, “Oh, I’m writing this [section] ‘cause it’s going to lead to this.” (2/3/93, p. 1, emphasis added)

Her understanding of the genre had deepened.

A year after she was introduced to the genre, Pam had a chance to write another grant proposal—this one a modification of the one done the year before. Rereading what she’d written a year earlier, she said, “I

went through and I thought . . . ‘Aaah—I wrote this? This is really lame!’ . . . There was just a lot of really bad—like it didn’t really answer the question very well” (7/20/93, p. 1). As she faced this proposal-writing task, she was well on the road to understanding a difficult genre; simultaneously, she was teaching a member of her staff the genre, parceling out parts of the writing task just as Mei and Donald had parceled out parts of the writing task to her a year earlier.

Birgitte’s experience learning the genre of the grant proposal began in a job previous to JRC. Reflecting on that time period several years earlier, she said:

I don’t think I really thought about [grant writing] as being dramatically different from anything else I’d written. We did a lot of practical-type writing in graduate school. It’s . . . like anything else. You think through the project. Which is the best way of presenting, describing the project to somebody who doesn’t know anything about it? And then you make an outline, and then you write it. You get an idea of how long it should be. I spent some time in the Foundation Library . . . but not so much to write a proposal. More to figure out who was likely to give me money. (11/24/92, pp. 2–3)

Several months later we had this conversation:

ANNE: This was the very first proposal you wrote [at JRC]. I’d love for you to scan it and tell me do you see things in there that you do differently now?

BIRGITTE: *It’s boring. It’s really boring. And I’m not saying I couldn’t write anything that’s boring at this point, but it doesn’t engage you. It doesn’t sound like a distinctive, innovative program. . . . There’s a lot of information, but if I were a program officer and I read it, this wouldn’t move me in any way. . . . Overall it’s reasonably well written, but it just has no lingering effect. . . . I think I’m more aware of—like you want to write something that makes the audience remember your project.*

ANNE: Where did you get that awareness from?

BIRGITTE: *Maybe from writing fiction. And from writing other types of writing. And from reading other people’s proposals. . . . I’m using more stories in my proposal . . . because I think it’s all people will remember when they’re done reading is the case story, or some little anecdote. People don’t remember numbers. (1/19/93, pp. 2–3, emphasis added)*

In the last few years Birgitte had taken fiction-writing classes and had started writing short stories in her free time. This genre enabled her to see how narrative could be embedded in the expository prose of the grant proposal.

We also have seen Ursula's struggles with the fine points of the business letter in all its permutations. When I was asking her about her understanding of the notion of genre, she said:

It's funny. . . . I said sort of kiddingly, "[Genre] seems like too good a word for [business writing]." This business category I wouldn't even include if I didn't have this job. . . . I would never think of that as a style of writing but now I know that it is. (12/8/92, p. 1)

What Ursula thought of as "styles of writing" were in fact genres. Genres may be shared by several discourse communities, so that a writer may come to a new discourse community already equipped with some relevant genre knowledge. But the writer must be sensitive to the ways genres are tailored to a specific community of writers and readers, as in the case of the federal grant proposal and the city grant proposal. As local knowledge grows (i.e., knowledge of a genre's use and particular norms within a given discourse community), communication becomes more effective.

Rhetorical Knowledge

In addition to a writer's need for subject matter knowledge and genre knowledge, each instance of writing requires attention to rhetorical challenges: how to juggle between the writer's purpose and the audience's need. After creating the program for the annual dinner, Ursula realized that she had been approaching the project from the perspective of a "consumer," as if she were attending the dinner; she didn't think about including a message from the director or a list acknowledging sponsors.

But that stuff's gotta be there. . . . Stuff about JRC. . . . I'm really finally starting to learn what I need to, thinking from the right perspective. . . . I have always been thinking about just . . . what's practical for the people who are gonna be here, not making everything into a big JRC PR thing, which is my job. (6/9/93, pp. 4-5)

Ursula's first program brochure was for the annual fund-raising dinner in the fall. The program brochure she was referring to above, for a public event in the spring, she approached very differently. What changed was

her understanding of the genre's rhetorical requirements: to guide someone through the events, but also to educate the public about JRC's mission and goals. By her second year at JRC, she in fact was keeping the institution's point of view in mind, so that each instance of written communication was used strategically or rhetorically.

Rhetorical knowledge also includes a keen sense of the audience's needs. All of the writers commented that Mei "knows everybody"; this knowledge enabled her to tailor letters to the individuals being addressed. For example, Pam wrote a draft of a letter to send to people who had endorsed JRC's application for a grant. Then, as she explained:

Mei would say, "Oh, . . . you should include labor in Nan's letter because that's something that's important to her," so Mei kinda just puts little points on each letter, like labor, you know, Asian, Hispanic. (9/22/92, p. 4)

Or, if the letter was very important and Mei did not know the individual personally, as in the case of the letter to the Secretary of Labor, she found someone who knew him to critique a draft and give specific feedback on how best to request him to speak at the annual fund-raising dinner.

Over time, the four writers developed personal relationships with many of the individuals they corresponded with, just as Mei had. Even if the writer did not personally know the specific individual(s) being addressed, as she became more familiar with JRC's relationships with other discourse communities, tailoring the written communication to that particular situation became easier. Mei commented at the end of the research project about Ursula's growing expertise in this area:

MEI: What she's really learning is . . . I think generally, even though she doesn't know the person or the organization, . . . she's gotten a good sense of . . . how we would want to approach, let's say, a foundation, a business, a person. *If you compare her writing for the last anniversary and this year's anniversary, you could see automatically she approached it very differently.*

ANNE: How would you describe the difference?

MEI: *I think she has a very good sense of who she's writing to, like she drafted a letter for me inviting people to be on [the] honorary committee and automatically she knew these are people we work with, at least they know something about us. So we don't have to say so much about JRC's work, maybe a global statement, but it's very warm, very genuine, and very upbeat, ver-*

sus a more formal, cold, but technically correct letter. (9/24/93, pp. 6-7, emphasis added)

These writers learned, over time, how each specific writing situation could be used strategically to interpret and further JRC's aims—whether in a routine thank-you letter, program brochure, or letter of request.

Seeing the rhetorical moment from the discourse community's point of view also entailed letting go of one's own sense of self as the author of the text. When Ursula started her job, she was excited by the opportunity to use her writing skills: If a fact sheet could be improved, she would edit it. Here's what she told me about a letter she was working on with a board member:

I finally got it together. Between my ideas and his ideas. See, part of—what he gave me was, it was done last year. And I wanted to change that a little bit. Just because I wanted to have my mark on it, I guess. (7/28/92, p. 11)

Contrast that statement with this one, some 6 months later:

Even though I've always wanted a job where I could write . . . now that I have one . . . I'm just trying to get everything out. [laughs] I'm not trying to write great letters or to do anything really great anymore, only once in a while. (1/12/93, pp. 8-9)

Her sense of purpose shifted—both in terms of her own job duties and in terms of the purposes that texts served within the overall scope of the organization's activities. Writing had become a means to an end beyond the writer's own goals rather than a means of self-expression. And written text had importance within a much larger arena of social action.

Selma also described a similar shift in her attitude toward writing grant proposals:

It's hard not to look at it personally when you don't get [the grant]. But you know, with each rejection they get a little easier and you know, the more funded things I get a chance to read, the more I think, mine wasn't that bad. It just wasn't what they were looking for. (5/4/93, p. 5, emphasis added)

Maggie, who wrote for a nonprofit similar to JRC, told me that over time her writing for the organization became "more of a task and less of a mission," which, she felt, was how it should have been all along. The

shift that all these writers experienced may have been due in part to a loss of idealism about the writing tasks—but also to a growing realization of the function of text within the organization's overall scope of activity. A writer thus may need to redefine standards for writing, with less pride of authorship and more of a sense of moving through one of many tasks to achieve the end goal. This shift to the institutional point of view also enables writers to gain the appropriate rhetorical stance in their texts.

Writing Process Knowledge

We have already seen the working conditions impeding concentration and efficiency that each writer had to learn to cope with. But each writer also could describe ways in which her writing process evolved at JRC in order to meet productivity standards and to deal with the types of writing the job required.

In addition to learning to compose at the computer and to hold a thought when interrupted in the middle of writing, Ursula learned a number of other important procedural strategies:

- She lowered her standards for originality and style so that she could stay on top of a steady stream of writing tasks.
- She learned to give her boss just a skeleton draft when requested to write something. From the skeleton she got feedback on what her boss was looking for in the document, thus accomplishing the task with fewer drafts.
- She determined a weekly cycle for writing that fit the ebb and flow of her tasks. Monday she handled "little stuff," and Tuesday through Thursday she tried to address writing projects. Fridays, fatigue set in and she wasn't as efficient, so she dealt with the "little stuff" on Fridays as well.

For Birgitte, who had to write as many as two or three proposals a month to keep her programs funded, efficiency evolved through breaking apart the stages of writing a proposal or report and knowing her own rhythm of productivity. She started by making notes—her initial thoughts about key points and structure—on a yellow pad. After writing her key points as an outline on the computer, she would start to compose, a section at a time, gradually erasing her outline. She also knew that she had a warm-up period followed by a period of "maximum efficiency":

The way it normally goes is that I'll have this sort of initial period where I'm not producing at the maximum level of efficiency, and I

know that, and I can sense it. And then it's almost like something clicks inside when I know that if I don't start writing now, I won't get done, and at that point . . . I'll just write and write and write. . . . Normally I write from 8 to 10 and maybe 12 hours a day. (7/22/92, p. 1)

In college, Pam outlined her papers in detail to organize her thoughts before writing. At JRC, she either did a very rough outline or plunged in, writing as fast as she could type and not worrying about sequencing, knowing that the cut-and-paste functions on her word-processing program allowed flexibility for rearranging and editing. She also learned not to write in linear fashion. When faced with a daunting report for the federal government, rather than figure out the key points before she started writing, she began with the simplest parts of the document: assembling data for the charts. Once that information was assembled, she could begin to write her way through the analysis.

Selma also adopted a writing style that kept her on target for deadlines. She waited "for the right moment"—but with a firm sense of how long she would need to accomplish the task—and at a certain point started the task even if inspiration had not hit. She also gauged how much time to spend on any one section of a proposal based on the number of points it could receive in the evaluation process:

"Evidence of existing or future labor demand," that could take a lot of research, and it could take a lot of writing, but it's only five points, so . . . you'll do the best you can and you'll go and dig up some statistics. But I wouldn't spend a week thinking about it. (8/4/92, p. 4)

Doing a good job, but doing so efficiently, was part of being a successful writer in this setting. Efficiency was a matter of learning the task's requirements but also learning how to handle the process of composing for a given task.

In sum, these five domains of knowledge—discourse community knowledge, subject matter knowledge, genre knowledge, rhetorical knowledge, and writing process knowledge—were necessary for the writers I studied to acquire within the local context for writing. While each knowledge domain contributes to and helps create the others, looking at each separately begins to give a picture of "writing expertise" in all of its complexity. Also, as I listened to the four writers react to texts they had written at JRC in the "early days" of their employment, they—

Table 4.1. Comparison of Novice and Expert Writing Knowledge

| Knowledge Domain | Novice | Expert |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Discourse community knowledge</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little awareness of discourse communities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tacit knowledge of discourse community norms informs writing |
| <i>Subject matter knowledge</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Borrows content from existing documents • Uses everyday vocabulary or uses specialized vocabulary awkwardly | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creates new content based on insider knowledge • Uses specialized vocabulary appropriately |
| <i>Genre knowledge</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each text is a first • Focuses on surface features of genre • Bridging from more familiar genres | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Text is recycled if genre is familiar • Focuses on deep structure and purpose of genre • Versatile in many genres and subgenres |
| <i>Rhetorical knowledge</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writes from personal point of view • Focuses on generic audience and matters of correctness • Takes pride in authorship | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writes from institutional point of view • Focuses on specific audience needs and social context • Writing is toward institutional goals |
| <i>Writing process knowledge</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses similar process for all writing tasks • Writing task is labor intensive; hard to get started, easily sidetracked | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Streamlined writing process, adapted to specific tasks • Works well under pressure |

and I—were able to see the ways in which their knowledge and skills had grown in connection with the writing tasks at JRC. None of the writers arrived at JRC a blank slate; each had had 4 or 6 years of training in academic writing at the postsecondary level and some exposure to writing in work contexts other than JRC. But each also could recount specific knowledge she had gained for accomplishing the writing tasks at JRC; this specific knowledge, from a cognitive perspective, would be considered "local knowledge." In fact, each probably started with some generalized knowledge in each domain that became increasingly localized knowledge through a process similar to the progression Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) have observed in studies of gaining expertise in other realms.

Table 4.1 gives an approximation of what the differences might look like, from novice to expert or general to local knowledge, based on com-

ments of the four informants about their writing at JRC in the early stages and their representations, in retrospective accounts, of writing knowledge gained elsewhere. In each of the knowledge domains, a writer who is gaining expertise goes from surface-level to more in-depth knowledge; or, to switch metaphors, a writer “borrows” from knowledge acquired in another writing situation to get started in a new situation until he or she gains the local knowledge.