

Chapter 4

Results

Twenty subjects discussed the ways they saw knowledge about grading created and transmitted in the FYC program at Texas Tech University. Their interview responses were recorded (i.e., notes were taken) and then coded by three researchers. Of the 60 interview sessions, the researchers were able to reach concordance on 33 of those sessions (i.e., agreement on theme and coding categories) and, thus, these 160 pieces of information culled from these 33 sessions form the corpus of this study. These interview sessions dealt with three over-arching themes: defining tacit knowledge and tacit knowledge transmission, the conduits used for knowledge transmission, and barriers to tacit knowledge transmission. The results obtained for each of these themes will be discussed separately.

What was particularly remarkable about the content of the interview sessions was the somewhat negative tone in which many of the respondents cast their answers. Additionally, while the initial focus of the interviews was to obtain information about those conduits of the FYC program that people actually used to collect, transmit, and create knowledge, the most profound overarching theme that emerged was concerned with the barriers to tacit (or explicit) knowledge transmission identified by the subjects. This was particularly surprising given the numerous face-to-face and online opportunities afforded by FYC at Texas Tech for instructors to share information with each other.

Defining Tacit Knowledge

The first theme to emerge from the interview corpus has to do with the understanding the research subjects had of the concept of tacit knowledge and how knowledge transmission might occur in FYC. In general, the subjects expressed little understanding of the concept. Some expressed a measure of disbelief in its existence while others stated that they could not see any relationship between tacit knowledge and FYC. Questioning the existence of

tacit knowledge is not surprising, given the fact that there is some degree of disagreement over the existence of tacit knowledge (e.g., Arnulf, et al 2005; Duguid 2005) or at least a skepticism concerning how it is defined given some of the apparent contradictions in the literature regarding tacit knowledge (Gourlay 2006). Almost half of the subjects surveyed (nine, to be exact) expressed doubt either that tacit knowledge exists or that there is a tacit component in grading knowledge. These nine subjects were all graduate instructors in literature and creative writing (five PhD students and four MA students) and, for all of them, tacit knowledge was an idea that they had had little exposure to. A typical comment (from a PhD student in literature with over three years of experience teaching FYC) was “We want to make our responses to students as explicit as possible. I don’t see how we can do that if we’re talking about something we can’t measure.” Another fairly typical response came from an MA student in creative writing who suggested that the idea of tacit knowledge was something that just didn’t “make sense.”

In a similar vein, two instructors (one a PhD student and the other an MA student in literature) took issue with the notion of instructors in a program creating knowledge of any sort, tacit or explicit, and transmitting it. Both suggested that the acquisition of grading knowledge is a sort of “go/no go” proposition. One instructor suggested that there is an “end point” to the acquisition of grading knowledge, that one either masters it or one doesn’t. Both took issue with the notion that the grading behavior of people in FYC evolves over the course of a semester. For these two instructors, there is no social construction of grading knowledge in the same way that there is in a field such as literary criticism. Both instructors suggested that FYC really hadn’t changed much over time and that those who suggested that student needs have changed were simply attempting to imbue the field of Composition Studies with the “veneer” of scholarship. Indeed, the question of praxis vs. scholarship was one

that emerged for many of the subjects. All but three of the instructors interviewed depicted FYC as “something you do” while their chosen field of scholastic endeavor (literature, technical communication) was “something you study.” Interestingly, the four creative writers interviewed represented their coursework (whether it involved writing poetry or fiction) as something “academic” while FYC was never referred to as academic. To be fair, all instructors spoke of the value in teaching undergraduates to write well but, for the instructors in this study, FYC simply lacks the depth and rigor that other areas of English Studies possess.

This view of FYC as “procedural” knowledge and other areas of English Studies as content-based mirrors the scholarship surrounding tacit knowledge itself. As Mullins (2002) suggests, tacit knowledge is at odds with most contemporary explorations into the philosophy of learning. Because tacit knowledge seems to have found a home in the discipline of organizational behavior (and, to a degree in education, in the work of Robert Sternberg), it is often seen as lacking the rigor and depth that characterize other areas of study in the humanities. Indeed, there were those subjects in the present study who took a rather radical view of knowledge creation in English Studies itself. Three of the subjects understood any endeavor in English studies as involving the transmission of “ready-made” knowledge rather than the creation of “new” knowledge. For example, one instructor, a PhD student in technical communication, described as “ridiculous” the perceived attempts within English Studies to “repackage” existing knowledge in novel ways. While the notion of pedagogy (however defined) as something that informs scholarship as a “transformation that takes place at the intersection of three agencies—the teacher, the learner and the knowledge produced” is widely accepted in English Studies (e.g., Salvatore 1996; McCurrie 2004), this was not a view unanimously held by the subjects in the present study. Another PhD student in technical

communication, while admitting that such knowledge creation was a foundation of literary studies, suggested that FYC was a part of the domain of technical and professional writing and, as such, was a much more “practical” field. Thus, according to this instructor, imparting elements of “effective” writing such as grammar, spelling, and transitions was what the FYC program at Texas Tech University should be concerned with. While these two comments regarding pedagogy and knowledge creation in English studies are somewhat extreme, it is worth noting that there was almost unanimous confusion expressed by the subjects in the present study regarding the place of FYC in English studies. While all the subjects accepted that “teaching Freshman Comp is what you do,” none expressed any clearly-defined ideas regarding how or why FYC is exactly situated in the milieu of an English Department, at least in terms of its content knowledge. Those subjects who believed that FYC has a domain-specific body knowledge (four PhD students, three in technical communication and one in creative writing, and one MA student in literature) still referred to FYC as “what I do for money” or as a “means to an end,” while their coursework represented the “real” work in English studies.

The view expressed above, that composition studies is not about knowledge creation, reflects an epistemological disagreement within the field of composition pedagogy. Specifically, a number of the research subjects seem to express the view that any “instructions” regarding grading and the FYC curriculum mirror Jean Lave’s (1988) observations about the “incorrigibility” of mathematical knowledge. Knowledge is said to be incorrigible when it is a-contextual and unchanging. For some of the research subjects, at least, the expectation that there is a “correct” way to teach FYC and grade drafts is a key assumption.

Two of the subjects were PhD students in Technical Communication and, while both of them were familiar with the concept of tacit knowledge, both expressed doubt about the utility of the concept in FYC. One suggested that

grading and responding to student writing was probably an area where tacit knowledge does not exist. This particular subject had taught in the FYC program at Texas Tech for over three years and had over six years of instructional experience in non-academic settings. “I can see it in something that involves skill, something like sports, but I just don’t think it operates in Freshman Comp.,” he stated. The other subject (who had over two years teaching experience in another FYC program and three years at Texas Tech) suggested that, while a tacit component may exist in the acquisition of grading knowledge, its impact would be negligible in helping instructors to master “the art of grading.” In fact, both of these subjects worried that, if FYC administrators did give any attention to tacit components of the grading process, the results would be detrimental for the FYC program. Both suggested that efforts to make grading criteria more explicit were key to a successful freshman writing program. Such a view (i.e., privileging the transmission of explicit knowledge in writing courses) certainly reflects the focus in many writing programs. Stevens and Sterling (2004), for example, suggest that the creation of explicit grading rubrics should be the major task of any writing intensive course. Although these researchers call writing a “rich and complicated” endeavor, all recommend the construction of explicit and rigorous grading rubrics as they offer “more objective” feedback to students and allow instructors easy tools for assessment. Indeed, it seems as if a consideration of any tacit component of grading knowledge seems to run counter to both the prevailing wisdom in composition pedagogy and to the understanding of the subjects in this study. Again, such a view (i.e., one that privileges the creation of explicit grading rubrics) seems to suggest that, for a number of the research subjects in the present study (as well as scholars in the field), there is an “incurable” aspect (e.g., Lave 1988) of grading knowledge. Additionally, this emphasis on explicit rubrics seems to mirror in some ways the call for “accountability” in public education.

All subjects interviewed expressed impatience with what they considered the ambiguity of the grading criteria in FYC at Texas Tech University. Those instructors with two years or less experience in the Texas Tech program decried the training sessions that administrators offer instructors as these sessions feature “too much time trying to build consensus” on specific grading criteria when the preference of these instructors would be for the administrators to “spell out” how criteria are to be interpreted. One instructor suggested that administrators claim to want instructors to arrive at consensus regarding interpretation of criteria but, in actuality, such consensus-building activities only mask the fact that the administrators themselves have little idea how the criteria are to be interpreted. Another instructor, a PhD student in technical communication, suggested that something was “really wrong” with the FYC program when two instructors can write such “widely divergent” commentary when responding to the same student essay. Equally troubling to five of the subjects (two MA students in literature, three PhD students, one each in technical communication, literature, and creative writing) was the perception that, even though there is a high degree of agreement between first and second readers across the program in terms of the numerical grades each reader assigns, the disparities in written commentary seem to subvert any real agreement or norming. The ICON system at Texas Tech University allows two readers to assign numerical grades to each major student draft and, despite what the subjects in this study understood as good agreement in terms of numerical grades, differences in instructor commentary seemed troublesome to them. One of the PhD students explained that, “I don’t buy what the administrators say about students being exposed to different types of commentary. I think it just confuses them.”

That the subjects in the present study expressed a high degree of impatience with what they saw as inconsistent or poorly defined grading criteria seems

fairly consistent with some of the literature on graduate students and personality traits. Onguewuzie (1999), for example, has shown that graduate students tend to procrastinate over grading and performing tasks related to their own coursework (a finding that will be discussed in greater detail in my discussion of the second theme here) and that this procrastination is related to what he terms a “socially prescribed perfectionism.” People with this tendency often express anxiety over the rather high standards that they believe those in authority hold for them. Statements such as the one made by an MA students in creative writing (“They want us to teach students through our commentary but don’t tell us how.”) seem indicative of this tendency. Similarly, all the MA students in the sample expressed some degree of anxiety over having to learn a system (TOPIC/ICON) that was so different than the ways in which they themselves were taught FYC (all the subjects in the present survey were taught FYC on “traditional” classrooms with one instructor responsible for classroom instruction and grading).. Additionally, Onwuegbuzie (1999) found that graduate students in general demonstrate a high degree of anxiety regarding anything that has to do with any writing that will be graded or assessed. Three of the PhD students (two technical communication and one creative writing) expressed discomfort with what they saw as the rather “scarce” feedback they received from writing program administrators on their grading commentary.

Another factor here might involve the rather complicated relationship graduate students in the humanities have with figures in authority (such as writing program administrators). Weaver and Qi (2005) suggest that graduate students often perceive faculty members as having “expert authority” over various academic domains. To the extent that this is true, these graduate students will tend to exhibit what these researchers term “passive withdrawal” from those tasks that require participation in the creation of “new” knowledge (such as, perhaps, responding to student writing and grading). The impatience

expressed by the subjects in the present study over the perceived ambiguity of the tasks of grading and responding may be related to these subjects' beliefs and attitudes about authority. One PhD in creative writing expressed this same sort of displeasure by stating, "I'm never going to be an expert in composition. Why don't they (the administrators) just tell us what they want?" Weaver and Qi also suggest that faculty-student interaction builds confidence in graduate students and several of the comments regarding a perceived lack of faculty/administrator interaction in the training process speak to the possible existence of such a variable. Twelve of the subjects in the study referred to themselves as "still learning the system" and all complained about what they perceived as the lack of interaction between graduate instructors and the administrators.

Conduits For Tacit Knowledge Transmission

Because FYC at Texas Tech University is a hybrid system (online and face-to-face features), there are, of course, many possible media through which knowledge may be transmitted. The subjects in the present study were asked about those features that they used most frequently and about those they saw as most useful for instructors in general. They were asked about all possible conduits for knowledge transmission, both formal and informal. One finding seems to warrant inclusion here, that of how the subjects viewed the formal FYC training sessions. Surprisingly, only two instructors (both MA students in literature) pointed to the formal training sessions (held once at the beginning of a particular academic semester and two or three times during a semester) as effective ways that they received information about grading. Most respondents either did not mention this feature as one they found particularly effective or expressed dissatisfaction with the feature. The sessions during the semester are moderated by the Assistant Directors of the FYC program (two PhD students who work as administrators in the program for a term of two semesters) and

those individuals were seen as lacking expertise in FYC or in being unable to organize useful training sessions by a number of the interview subjects. A PhD student in literature expressed dismay that FYC administrators did not “care enough” to moderate these training sessions themselves. Letting these “student assistants” manage the training sessions was viewed as apparent disregard for training by the administrators.

Other subjects took a less extreme view but most expressed dissatisfaction with the more “formal” training features of the FYC program. Indeed, nine of the subjects called these features ineffective while three (including the PhD student mentioned above) actually criticized administrators for what these subjects believed was a lack of interest in training. Again, two MA students believed that the formal training was effective and informative.

The three features of the FYC program that most of the subjects in the present study reported using most often (and those aspects that were indicated as being most effective and most satisfying) were (in order of frequency with which they were reported): the “audit drafts” feature, the chat box that appears on the online grading interface, and the expertise of tutors in the University Writing Center. This first feature, the “audit drafts” feature is a way that instructors grading online can keep track of how many drafts they have graded as well as how their numerical grades compare with those of the other grader who grades the same draft. All the subjects interviewed reported using this feature as it allowed them to “norm” with other instructors. A typical explanation of how the feature was used was provided by an MA student in literature who described a “typical” grading session in which she would grade two or three drafts that had already received an initial grade. She would then access the “audit drafts” feature to compare the grades she had assigned to the initial grades awarded. If her grades were over five points under or over the initial grades given, she reported that she would “re-think” what she was doing.

The “audit drafts” feature was developed in the Fall of 2002 and, thus, is an early feature of the TOPIC/ICON system and it seems to exemplify: (1) the User-Centered Design aspects of TOPIC/ICON and (2) the difficulties inherent in designing such a complicated system. Although the genesis of the “audit drafts” feature involved some degree of conflict between one of the administrators and instructors who demanded feedback and transparency, its present usefulness is due at least in part to the fact that its development arose from an expressed need on the part of the users of TOPIC/ICON.

Yet, even with what would seem to be widespread acceptance and use of this feature throughout the program, three instructors admitted using the feature to “cheat” on the norming process. These instructors (one PhD student and two literature MA students) reported that they will often assign a grade to a draft for which they are the second reader but, before submitting that grade, they will read the first reader’s grade on the “audit drafts” feature and adjust theirs accordingly. Although these three instructors were the only research subjects admitting to this practice, all suggested that they had seen other instructors do the same. These three instructors all referred to the practice as “cheating,” explaining that the way the feature was “supposed to be used” was to enable an instructor to check his or her grades after they had been submitted and not beforehand.

A second feature used by all the subjects in the study was the “chat box” on the TOPIC grading interface, an addition made in 2004. This development allowed instructors who were using the system and actively grading to chat with each other for the purpose of collaboration and sharing information. The feature was not universally welcomed, however. Four of the subjects (two PhD students, one in technical communication and one in literature, and two MA students, one in creative writing and one in literature) stated that they found the feature “silly” or “pointless,” but all four admitted to reading the most recent sections of the archived chats to learn “if any grading criteria had changed” or “if there were

difficulties other graders found that I might need to be aware of.” Seven of the subjects in the present study were quite enthusiastic about the chat feature. Three MA students (two in literature and one in creative writing) referred to it as the most helpful feature of the online grading interface while two PhD students (one in creative writing and one in technical communication) referred to the feature as something that “humanizes” the online grading experience. Four of the subjects (3 MA students in literature, one in creative writing) all reported that they participated regularly in the online chats. The other subjects all seemed to prefer using the chat archive to learn what other instructors were doing. Five of the subjects (two PhD students—one in literature, one in creative writing—and three MA students in literature) expressed concern, however, that, because administrators know when instructors are grading and what they are chatting about, the feature is (in the words of one) “another level of surveillance.”

The third most popular feature for knowledge transmission (eight of the subjects reported using it) was the University Writing Center. Administratively, of course, the University Writing Center is not part of the FYC program yet the pool of tutors is drawn from graduate English instructors for the most part and, indeed, the vast majority of clients are undergraduates in an FYC course. A PhD student in technical communication reported that she deliberately waits until the end of the week (“the last possible minute”) to grade so that she can learn from writing center tutors how the FYC students who visit the writing center interpret a particular assignment. Three of the subjects who reported making use of writing center personnel were themselves writing center tutors and all three reported that they were very likely to discuss grading criteria with their fellow tutors on an informal basis. The five other subjects all reported that they would like to work in the writing center as all of them felt that such an assignment would help them understand the FYC curriculum (and grading criteria) much more profoundly. Four of these subjects suggested that exposure to the

problems undergraduates experience in responding to assignment criteria would help them understand these criteria more deeply. One subject, another PhD student in technical communication, reported that he will provide extra credit to students who visit the writing center if they report to their classmates the following week what they learned from tutoring. This instructor reported that he, too, used this information to modify his own grading.

Like the previously discussed conduit (i.e., the chat box feature), the utilization of writing center personnel involves the use of conversation for knowledge transmission and creation. As von Krogh, and his associates (2000) suggest, conversation is something that is both encouraged and “managed” by people in successful organizations. Unlike the chat box feature, however, those subjects who discussed assignments with writing center tutors engaged in more of what we naturally think of as “conversation” (i.e., face-to-face contact in a less-structured setting). Bordum (2000) views conversation as perhaps the most underutilized but potentially powerful conduit for tacit knowledge transmission. Similarly, participation in and observation of workplace conversations is a large part of Lave’s (1988) model of legitimate peripheral participation and Brown and Duguid (1991) suggest that more-or-less informal media such as conversation help participants to situate and ultimately understand the tasks they need to learn.

One potential conduit for tacit knowledge transmission that (somewhat surprisingly) few instructors reported using was that of the grading or “peer mentoring” groups. These groups were instituted in 2003 and, although their role and focus has developed between then and the present, the groups are composed of at least one more experienced instructor and several with less experience in FYC at Texas Tech or in general. The groups were tasked with meeting regularly to either (1) discuss issues such as the challenges faced in grading and responding to a particular assignment or (2) actually grade

“collaboratively” in one of the computer classrooms so that members might “norm” their grading practices. The instructors in the present study who mentioned these groups routinely dismissed them as being rather ineffective. All but two of the subjects (both PhD students in technical communication) reported that their groups never met on a regular basis. An MA student in creative writing complained, for example, that the leader of her particular group made little effort to schedule meetings and, as a result, the group members made no attempt to attend when those few meetings were scheduled. An MA student in literature complained that, while her group began the Fall 2004 semester meeting regularly, the meetings were abandoned because members complained that they had “run out of things to talk about.” The two instructors who reported meeting regularly did so because they perceived regular meetings as a program requirement but both reported “diminishing returns” over the course of a semester. One reported that, after four weeks, the group began to repeat the same topics with little resolution. The other instructor reported that the group meetings did little to enhance his own grading knowledge although he reported that a couple of the novice instructors in his group seemed to show an improvement in grading performance over the course of the Fall 2004 semester. These findings are surprising given the fact that groups such as these are widely recommended as rather effective conduits for tacit knowledge transmission (e.g., Baumard, 1999; Bordum, 2000).

Barriers to Tacit Knowledge Transmission

By far, the most interesting theme that emerged from the data was that of perceived barriers to tacit knowledge transmission that are both idiosyncratic (peculiar to individual instructors) and inherent in the FYC program itself. Because FYC at Texas Tech University has so many conduits through which tacit knowledge can be transmitted (e.g., those described above as well as other

features of TOPIC/ICON), these identified barriers are somewhat surprising in that the subjects in the present study discussed them at such great length. The barrier identified most often by the research subjects concerned the perception that the FYC program is, in reality, a “top-down” system that is nevertheless presented to instructors as one that is recursive and feedback oriented. Nineteen subjects expressed views such as this one expressed by a PhD student in technical communication: “They keep telling us that they want our input but they never listen to us. They already have their minds made up about how they believe things should be done.” Another respondent, an MA student in creative writing, suggested that administrators are being less than genuine when they request input from instructors stating, “They know how the system is supposed to work so why don’t they just tell us how to use it?” Views such as these were clearly the norm for the subjects in the present study and seemed to stand in stark contrast to the evolutionary characteristics of TOPIC and ICON and the fact that its history and development do contain instances in which new features come about as a result of requests from instructors. This, however, is a feature that scholars such as Foray (2002) have written about rather extensively. She suggests that more-or-less “sophisticated” users (i.e., those who have some degree of computer literacy and / or some expertise in the subject matter in which they are using computers) will resist full participation in a system that appears to require compliance. She suggests that even those systems that do require “top-down” instructions will be better utilized if they have room for “democratization” (ways that users can modify procedures).

Almost paradoxically, the second facet of this particular theme was that instructors tended to feel as if they had no expertise at all and were, thus, unwilling to share their insights with other instructors or with the writing program administrators. Ten of the subjects in the present study expressed such a view and, interestingly, eight of these subjects also simultaneously suggested that it was the

fact that TOPIC / ICON seemed to have no room for their input that caused them to balk at sharing any insights they might have. A PhD student in technical communication referred to TOPIC / ICON as “mysterious” and expressed the concern that, because it seems so complicated that he would “never have the time to learn it, to essentially take it for a drive and kick the tires.” An MA student in creative writing (who, incidentally, possessed a rather high degree of programming knowledge) asserted that “sometimes the system seems like it’s top secret.” He went on to recount that, when he had asked questions about a particular feature, he was told that he “shouldn’t worry about that.” Another MA student in creative writing expressed the view that the administrators were “almost Machiavellian.” She said, “They ask for your input but they don’t give you the information you need to make your input meaningful. Then, if you do suggest something, you’re told that you don’t know enough to make a suggestion.” Others, such as this PhD student in literature, claimed that, “it would be too much trouble to learn the ‘ins and outs’ of the system anyway. I just wish they’d tell us what they want and be done with it.” He expressed a great deal of hesitancy when asked if he shares any “tips” with other instructors, stating, “I’m on my own. I guess we all are.” Given the negativity of statements such as these, it should be noted that, at the beginning of each semester, instructor input has been requested explicitly. Meetings and workshops have been arranged but, since 2003, instructor attendance has been spotty at best.

Just as Kinneavy (1971) lamented that composition as “the stepchild of English studies,” lack of interest in FYC and uncertainty about whether FYC even belongs in an English department provided the next barrier to knowledge transmission between instructors. A PhD student in creative writing suggested that “I know composition is something I’ll have to do in my first real job but I’m not all that interested in it.” Similarly, other instructors saw teaching in FYC as a “means to an end.” A PhD student in technical communication

indicated that he was marking time teaching composition until he took the requisite courses that would let him teach the “cool stuff—web design, hypertext, and stuff like that.” One MA student in literature expressed a similar lack of interest in composition studies but suggested that her interest might be kindled if “they put some readings in the course. That way it would seem more related to English.” It should be noted here that FYC at Texas Tech has itself attempted to situate itself away from the “literature” faculty by placing itself under the aegis of technical communication within the department. The English department at Texas Tech University houses two rather distinct programs: one in technical and professional writing and one in literature and languages (which includes creative writing). Students can earn MA and / or PhD degrees in either Technical Communication and Rhetoric (TCR) or in English, per se. The FYC program, which was under English, is now a part of TCR. Maxine Hairston (1992) hailed such moves as ways to establish a separate identity for Composition studies. Yet, at Texas Tech, neither English nor TCR students seem to differ in their attitudes about teaching FYC.

Also expressed was the fear of “doing something wrong” when teaching or grading drafts in FYC. A number of the instructors expressed great concern that they would “create third reads.” Again, we should note that, when the numerical grades that two instructors assign a draft differ by more than 8 points, that draft goes to a third reader. An MA student in literature expressed “being afraid” that she was creating third reads. When asked what consequences she feared, she stated, “I don’t know but in 5367—the training course—we were warned that we better not.” Another instructor, a PhD student in technical communication, put his dilemma in fairly stark moral terms: “I feel like I’m cutting corners when I do things my way. I’m letting down the faculty and my students. I find ways to make my job easier because I have to but I’ll never tell anyone because I’ll feel ashamed.” Another instructor, an MA student in literature, stated that

she was hesitant to do anything that “wasn’t explicitly stated even if it’s not explicitly prohibited because I know I’ll always be wrong.” Again, when she was asked about what consequences she feared, her reply was that she wasn’t sure, “but I don’t want to find out.” Another subject, a PhD student in technical communication stated that he didn’t “share anything novel” about how he graded on TOPIC / ICON because “it’s important that I stay on their (the administrators’) good side.”

An interesting piece of information that emerged from these discussions involves a strategy that three of the subjects admitted using to avoid third reads on drafts. Although this was discussed above rather briefly, it warrants a closer look here. All three referred to the practice as “cheating” the system. After logging in to grade second reads, these instructors reported that they had found a way to use the “audit drafts” feature (discussed in greater detail above as a conduit for tacit knowledge transmission) to ensure that their numerical grades matched those of the first grader. They found a way that they could choose a draft to grade and then simultaneously open the audit drafts feature to see what grade had been assigned that particular draft. They would then assign that draft a score 1-2 points lower or higher than the one the first grader assigned. I inquired as to how widespread such a practice was and two of the subjects informed me that they knew “several” other instructors doing the same thing. These two instructors saw the practice as “wrong” but also as an effective way to “avoid punishment.” Again, both were quite vague as to the punishment they were attempting to avoid.

Another barrier to tacit knowledge transmission that was expressed by a number of the instructors was that of disappointed expectations. Every subject in the study expressed some dismay that FYC at Texas Tech was “so different” than anything they had experienced either as students or as teaching assistants / instructors elsewhere. A PhD student in literature complained about how he felt

“disconnected” while grading, that the fact that grading is performed online made the act of grading solitary and somewhat dissatisfying. When asked how he graded in a traditional class (as he had had experience as an instructor in other settings), he replied that he graded papers alone but that “somehow it didn’t seem as if I was alone.” Another subject, an MA student in creative writing, complained that, because she was grading drafts by students that she didn’t teach in the classroom, that the act of grading took on a “disembodied” character. A PhD student in technical communication spoke of how “strange” he found the experience of online grading: “I can give good feedback and good commentary to students but, because I don’t know who they are, they don’t seem real to me and I find myself writing in a very nasty, rude tone.” An MA student in literature talked about how “monotonous” it was grading a sequence of online drafts. When asked to compare this experience to that of grading paper copies (he had some experience teaching high school English), he replied that “holding someone’s actual paper makes it seem more real and more important.” Another MA student in creative writing (who had worked a variety of part time jobs) likened grading online to telemarketing.

This disappointment of expectations is a subject of some scholarly interest in the field of organizational behavior. Ursula Huws (2005) discusses how the online world of work has disrupted our traditional expectations of certain occupations. She suggests that occupations can be seen as either “fixed,” “footloose,” or “fractured.” Fixed jobs are more-or-less traditional occupations. We might bake bread or teach school or answer telephones in an office but we perform these jobs at a fixed location. In other words, we work at a bakery, a school, or an accounting firm and our work is located. These jobs feature other similar workers and have a “permanent” feel to them (often through benefits packages or the opportunity to advance within the organization). Those jobs she terms “footloose,” however, may involve changing location every day (“temp

work”) or may involve working online either for one company or as a contractor. These jobs are defined by the lack of one defined “workplace.” Usually, these jobs are seen as sequential. We work one and move on to another. If such jobs are at a clearly-defined workplace, we do not form relationships with other workers because of the temporary nature of the work. Huws calls certain jobs “fractured” because they combine elements of both. A worker may “telecommute” or a consultant might provide advice to a firm overseas, the members of which he or she may never meet face-to-face. While “footloose” jobs have a disembodied character, they can be satisfying, according to Huws, because the workers do not expect such work to be permanent. “Fractured” jobs are often dissatisfying because their dual nature ultimately disappoints those workers who expect one or the other type of job. The subjects in the present study all expressed varying degrees of dissatisfaction (at least initially) with working in a hybrid instructional system. Many felt as if they were separated from other instructors by virtue of the fact that so much of the work is performed online.

Additionally, several of the subjects in the present study reported some reluctance to share grading (or instructional) knowledge with other instructors because of some sense of role confusion. All the subjects in the present study were both instructors and graduate students and, according to one, a PhD student in creative writing, “I need to do everything I can to protect my status in the department.” He and others admitted that, because they were competing with other instructors for scholarships, special jobs, and other considerations (the grading reductions that came with various student assistantships), they were unlikely to share any useful information about job performance with others. An MA student in literature stated that, “if I find a way to do something better, that makes me stand out. Why should I share it with people who compete with me?” The notion of instructors as competitors vying for scarce departmental resources

was expressed by eight of the subjects. A PhD student in technical communication admitted that, “I know it’s wrong but I want to beat these people.” An MA student in literature suggested that “keeping up with grading quotas makes me look good.” Another MA student in creative writing suggested that he shouldn’t care about helping others as “when we graduate, I’ll probably never see them again.”

Of course, scholars with a Marxian orientation have often critiqued the use of competition to keep order among employees. Yet, in the present case, the competition does not involve anything that occurs “on the job.” Instead, the subjects identify competition for scholarships and fellowships in their roles as graduate students as affecting their willingness to share information with other instructors. As one Creative Writing PhD student put it, “I don’t know how much my performance in the classroom or online enters into my chances for scholarships but I think that poor performance might hurt my chances.” Despite the widespread perception (as discussed above) that FYC and graduate study are two separate things, subjects in the present study also tend to perceive a relationship between the two. It is this relationship that, in some cases leads to a reluctance to share information with other instructors.

Another barrier to tacit knowledge transmission that subjects identified was that of the “split” between instructors whose graduate study involved technical communication and those who studied literature or creative writing. Nine of the subjects reported that this was a barrier that discouraged the sharing of information. A PhD student in technical communication said, “I guess these people are all right but I have nothing in common with them. One of them told me what she was doing for her thesis and it was all I could do to keep from rolling my eyes.” An MA student in creative writing stated that she had nothing in common with the students in technical communication because she perceived them as “nothing more than practitioners.” Indeed, those subjects studying

literature or creative writing tended to see those in technical communication as less “scholarly” than themselves. Those in technical communication were seen as caring less about the students whose work they responded to than they were about the TOPIC interface. Conversely, those in technical communication tended to view their counterparts in literature or creative writing as somewhat impractical in outlook and somewhat “other-worldly.” A PhD student in technical communication expressed the view that, “I don’t know how studying ‘food in modernist literature’ helps anyone.”

It should be noted here that, at the time these interviews were conducted, faculty in the TTU English Department were exploring the possibility of moving technical communication faculty (including FYC) to the Communication Studies Department. Four of the students in literature and creative writing (3 MA and one PhD) saw in these discussions further justification for their estrangement from instructors in technical communication. An MA student in literature stated, “They don’t see Composition as English! Maybe they should just go.” One MA student worried how such a move would affect her work in FYC. She wondered, “Does that mean I’m out of a job?” Whatever the merits of moving FYC away from its traditional moorings in the English Department, the subjects in the present study (in literature and creative writing) saw in these discussions a reinforcement of their suspicions that FYC might not enjoy a “best fit” in English studies and a justification for their reluctance to share information with their colleagues who are studying technical communication.

Another split that the subjects in the present study perceive is that of practitioner vs. scholar and this perception also seems to lead to some reluctance to share information with other instructors. One MA student in literature suggested that her cohorts in creative writing were “practitioners. They don’t care about content; they only care about teaching format to students.” An MA student in creative writing, however, saw things quite differently stating,

“I care about helping students use writing to help them explore. The technical communication people just want to teach students how to fool around on the internet.” Indeed, of the five students who mentioned this “split,” all perceived themselves as “scholars” and derided others as practitioners. Unfortunately, all five indicated that, because of this perceived split, they would be unwilling to share information with mere “practitioners.”

The interviews revealed some distrust between student instructors and administrators but there was also the perception (expressed by five of the subjects) that the student Assistant Directors in the FYC program led to reluctance to share information. Every semester, graduate students are invited to apply for a position as Assistant Director in FYC. These positions last for one year and provide the student with practical experience in the administration of a writing program. Ideally, these Assistant Directors serve as a liaison between FYC administrators and graduate student instructors but, for at least five of the subjects in the present study, these students are viewed with suspicion and serve as another justification for instructors not sharing information with each other. A PhD student in technical communication stated that, “They’ll probably report back to the Composition faculty if I screw up. I don’t tell them anything.” An MA student in creative writing referred to the two Assistant Directors serving at the time of the interviews as the “Comp Faculty’s boys.” An MA student in literature described the postings one of the Assistant Directors had made to an English Department listserv as evidence that they weren’t “one of us.” She suggested that, because of the reduction in grading workload that the Assistant Director position features, people who hold the positions, “forget about the problems we have and seem more concerned with toadying.”

Attempts in various workplaces to create these liaison positions have often met with mixed success. On the one hand, Peter Senge, et al (1999) describe how employees can be identified and utilized as agents of innovation in

organizations. Bordum (2000) suggests that these liaisons can be the catalysts for tacit knowledge transmission. On the other hand, Antonio Negri (1984) suggests that, when such positions were created in the Italian automobile industry during a time of great innovation in the factories, rank-and-file auto workers often refused to interact with those workers management had designated as specific management-labor liaisons.

Another barrier to knowledge transmission identified by the subjects in the present study involves the perception of surveillance in FYC. Twelve of the subjects identified surveillance as perhaps the most negative aspect of the FYC program for them. Much data is captured and collected via the online grading in TOPIC / ICON and much of this data is archived. Additionally, instructors perceive that, even popular features of the grading interface such as the “chat box” described above allow administrators to “watch” when an instructor is grading online. As one MA student in creative writing stated, “They don’t trust us so they’re always watching.” Another subject, an MA student in literature complained that, when he suggested to one of the FYC administrators that a particular type of data they were collecting was worthless and might give an inaccurate representation of instructor grading performance was told that, “We’re going to collect it anyway. We might need it.” This instructor saw this reported interaction as indicative of a lack of trust between administrators and instructors. “They feel as if the more data they collect, the more power it gives them,” he said. Because of what they perceived as inordinate degrees of surveillance, two instructors (one PhD in creative writing and one in literature) refused to allow an FYC administrator to videotape their classrooms. Both admitted that they would have liked to have shared particular lessons with other instructors but, because they did not trust FYC administrators’ use of the video, they had to refuse. “It might be paranoia,” one of them said. “But, who knows? They’ll see something on the video and give me a hard time about it.” The other

suggested that, “the less of a trace I leave, the better it is for me.” In terms of a popular feature such as the “chat box,” one instructor, an MA in literature, stated that, “I’ll read it but I dare not participate in any chats. I don’t know what they do with the transcripts of each chat.” Wright (2002) and Negri (1984) have written at length about workplace surveillance and the suspicious atmosphere these practices can create. Unfortunately, because grading in the FYC program at TTU is performed online, permanent records of instructors’ grading performance are necessarily created. While all of the instructors who suggested that this is a barrier to their willingness to share information agreed that online grading by its very nature leaves “traces,” all suggested that much of the development of the program contains increasing levels of surveillance.

In a similar context to that of disappointed job expectations and surveillance, four of the instructors (two PhD students, one in literature and one in technical communication and two MA students in literature) suggested that the “automated” nature of TOPIC / ICON was, at times, so off-putting to them that they simply “did their jobs” and refused to share any information, a task that would require extra effort according to them. “It’s so strange and so impersonal. I never expected that grading would look like this,” one of the PhD students explained. All four of these subjects believed that responding to student work should be a more “humanistic” activity and that responding to student work online robbed the task of its necessary human characteristics. The PhD student in technical communication admitted that such a complaint sounded strange coming from someone who was interested in online teaching but he suggested that, “perhaps online grading is not appropriate technology for this setting.” One of the MA students recalled her own experiences in FYC and suggested that when she received a “hand-graded” hard copy of an essay draft from her instructor, the numerous comments written in ink suggested to her that the instructor “cared enough to pick up my paper and engage with it.” Marxian

literature is replete with critiques of automation. In *Capital*, (1906), Marx himself suggested that automation led to demands for workers to “produce more” as it simultaneously alienated them from the product of their labor, a critique echoed by these four subjects in a somewhat tangential manner. Of course, Negri (1984) wrote much about resistance to automation in the Italian automobile industry. While this particular theme did not emerge with the same frequency as those of job expectations and surveillance regarding FYC, it is related to these themes and, as such, bears mentioning here.

Finally, role confusion (the fact that the instructors in the present study are both students and instructors) created some degree of reluctance to share information with other instructors. While the competitive aspects of graduate study (competing for finite resources in scholarships and fellowships) were discussed at some length above, here the instructors referred to problems of time constraints. Four of the instructors (one PhD in creative writing, 2 MA students in literature and one in creative writing) all suggested that they might be willing to share information with other instructors but that such sharing would involve “extra effort.” One of the MA students complained that, “While that’d be nice, I barely have time for my course work as it is now.” None of the four instructors who identified this barrier believed that there were any mechanisms in place that allowed easy and effective transfer of information. When asked about the FYC training sessions as possible conduits for information transfer, two of the instructors remarked that, “nobody really pays attention in such meetings.” All four identified time as a barrier to information sharing and all four admitted that, if they had to choose between spending time on instructional duties or academics, they would not hesitate to choose academics.

Emergent Themes

The picture that emerges from the interviews is not without its contradictions, but it would be a reasonable assessment of the data to suggest the following interpretations. First, much disagreement exists regarding both the nature of composition study and practice and the place of composition in the English Department. The subjects in the present study voiced uncertainty about whether FYC even belonged under the umbrella of English Studies. Additionally, there was fairly widespread disagreement about whether or not FYC and composition studies, in general, was an incorrigible realm of knowledge and, thus, whether any information transfer (other than top-down) need to or could potentially occur. Unlike other areas of the discipline, the notion of social construction of knowledge in FYC seemed a controversial one for these instructors.

Next, the conduits for knowledge transmission identified by the instructors all involved features that either provided immediate information (e.g., the “audit drafts” feature) or allowed instructor-to-instructor contact in an apparently unmediated space (the “chat box”). This is especially paradoxical as instructors know that the chat box provides administrators with an opportunity for surveillance. Additionally, writing center tutors provided another source of information that is essentially peer-to-peer and unmediated by administrators. It is this lack of supervision or mediation, real or apparent, that seems to distinguish their choice of conduit. Formal meetings and training sessions were not identified as effective vehicles for information transfer.

Finally, most of the interviews dealt with barriers to knowledge transmission. Some of the subjects expressed distrust of the FYC administrators. The perception of few common scholarly interests between instructors was viewed as another reason instructors do not share information with each other. Fear of negative consequences for any novel use of TOPIC / ICON was identified as another reason instructors tend to (in the words of a PhD student) “lay low.” The

competitive nature of graduate study—instructors competing against one another for scholarship and fellowship resources—was also identified as a barrier to information transfer. Students suggested that they hesitate to provide helpful advice to other graduate instructors that they are competing with. Disappointed expectations (i.e., to use Huws’ terminology, FYC at Texas Tech is a “fractured” job) left other instructors reluctant to share information with each other.

A series of interviews with various faculty members at both Texas Tech and other institutions were conducted for validation purposes. Onwuegbuzie (1999) suggests that graduate students, because they are novices in the academic profession, often understand the profession in ways that are fraught with contradictions. It is certainly possible that much of the distrust voiced by graduate instructors represents an early stage in professional development. It is also quite possible that there are aspects of the system at TTU that encourage reluctance to share information, even given the features of the FYC system that would seem to encourage such information transfer. Additionally, although the present study explores the perceptions and attitudes of instructors at one particular university, the results obtained here may really suggest something inherently problematic in the training of FYC instructors in whatever institutional setting. These were some of the issues explored in a series of one-hour interviews with three tenure-track English faculty at Texas Tech and two such faculty members at the University of Texas at San Antonio and the University of Missouri at Kansas City, respectively.

As a postscript, analyses of variance were performed on the supervisory and student commentary rankings for all the subjects in the present study. No significant difference between average rankings for either 2004 and 2005 on variables such as gender, age, experience, whether or not an instructor was in the classroom or simply online, or as to whether they instructed in English 1301 and English 1302.