

Claiming Expertise

CS4900 -- Technology and Transformation

Fall 2005

The third practice of innovation -- offering -- is the turning point from pure invention to innovation. Prior to this point we are dealing only with a new possibility and its story, but we have not offered it to anyone or asked anyone to support or accept it. In the offering practice, we want to accomplish four things:

- Propose the adoption of the new practice
- Say what's in it for each member of the adopting group
- Tell how this can be accomplished
- Claim and inspire trust in your expertise

We will focus here on the fourth objective.

A claim of expertise that inspires trust is an example of the conversational practice called "grounding an assessment". The claim -- "I am competent in this domain" -- is the assessment. To support the assessment, you offer a number of assertions about concrete facts and evidence. If you support it well, your listeners will accept your claim and thereby trust your expertise. If not, they may not accept your offer because they do not trust that you can make it happen.

Please read the handout, "Assertions and Assessments," from the course materials web page (cne.gmu.edu/pjd/TT). This document discusses skillful grounding of assessments as a foundational practice for effective communication. Assessments precede your call for action. The grounding supplies a basis for your listeners to conclude that the situation demands action and that the action you propose has acceptable risk and worthy return.

People will not willingly follow your call for action when all you offer is an ungrounded assessment. You can sometimes invoke your authority or a threat to get their compliance, but that's not the same as acceptance. Moreover, if you are in the habit of offering mostly ungrounded assessments, you will gain a reputation for being "flaky", "insubstantial", "airy", etc.

Even though you supply grounding for your assessment, some listeners will accept the assessment and others will not. There are four main reasons why listeners won't accept your assessment:

- Attempting to use assessments instead of assertions for grounding.
- Your assertions are not sufficiently concrete and specific.
- Your assertions are not relevant to the concerns of your audience.
- Your listener has different standards from you for accepting assessments -- for example, the listener may want more assertions than you have supplied, or may want assertions addressing criteria you have not supplied.

When you find that others are not accepting your assessments, engage them in conversation. Ask them what is missing and see if you can supply it. What criteria do they use for acceptance? What other assertions or additional detail can you supply?

Standards for Competent and Expert

The words competent and expert refer to the overall skill level of a person in a domain. The exact criteria for these levels depend on a community consensus from dealing with individuals of different skill levels for a long time.

Generally, the competent person has the skill to accomplish standard tasks properly and to the satisfaction of customers. This person is familiar with all the standard situations and knows how to act without having to figure it out. When faced with a new situation, this person invokes the basic groundrules and figures out an appropriate course of action. This person can be relied on to interact well and responsibly with customers, leaving them satisfied without the intervention of a supervisor.

The expert has a high degree of problem-solving skill honed with considerable practice and many varied experiences. Others admire the expert's style of performance. The expert can solve many problems that people of less skill find difficult or impossible. The expert's intuition leads immediately to appropriate and rapid action without having to "figure things out." The expert can design new practices that help people avoid problems in the future (innovation). The expert copes with new situations through improvisations and is more likely to rewrite the basic groundrules than to try to figure out how to apply them in the new situation. The expert is recognized as

such by members of the community and in particular by other experts.

Examples

Alex says:

I am an expert programmer. I have been writing programs for over 15 years. I have worked in several kinds environments including database services, financial services, transportation, and university computing centers. I have written code for DoD applications. I am thoroughly familiar with the modern languages Java, Ada, and C++ as well as assembly code. I follow good programming practice such as proper indentation, structured comments, and user-friendly documentation. My customers send letters of satisfaction to my boss about my work. I graduated from college with straight A's and scored very high on the programming aptitude test.

Barbara says:

I am an expert programmer. I have been programming for 15 years. Over the years I have used every major programming language and have written thousands of applications ranging from tens of modules to several thousands of modules. Among my major accomplishments are a database system for Citibank, a traffic control system for Philadelphia, and an air traffic control system for the FAA. I have been named chief programmer for every programming team I've been on for the past five years. Many people in my organization come to me to help solve problems they are having trouble with; I can usually help them in a jiffy. Some of my programs are included in standard distributions with Unix and Oracle systems. I receive frequent speaking invitations to discuss risks of programming and methods to assure safe programs for critical applications. I received two awards for programs I wrote, including the ACM software system award.

Most people react that Alex is not an expert and Barbara is. They would agree with Alex if he claimed competent rather than expert. Alex has not been specific about his accomplishments, has offered no evidence that anyone thinks his work is good, has offered no signs of recognition of his expertise (except for customer satisfaction), and has offered some assertions with no obvious relevance to the claim (e.g., getting A's in college).

For more information about ladder of competence and the criteria for the various levels including competent and expert, you can read:

- "Career Redux," in the IT columns section of the course website (cne.gmu.edu/pjd/TT)
- Hubert Dreyfus's *On the Internet*, Routledge, 2001, ch 2.

The Exercise

You will stand before the group and present a claim of expertise along with its grounding. After you present your claim, there will be a short Q&A session so that you can answer questions raised by group members. There will then be a vote in which group members say whether they are "in", "out", or "undecided" regarding your claim. Finally, there will be feedback from group members telling you what worked well or did not work well in your presentation.

Choose a professional domain in which to make your claim; for example, computer science or military operations. If you cannot ground a claim of expert in your domain, then ground a claim of competence. If you want to choose a domain not directly connected to your current profession, check with me first.

We will divide into three groups of about 13 each and go to separate rooms. You will have 10 minutes for your presentation, Q&A, and feedback. This will be enough time for the three groups to complete within 3 hours. We will strictly control the time so that everyone gets a turn. We will come back together into the full group for the last hour on Dec 9.

In your time slot, limit your presentation: 2 minutes is a good target, 3 minutes absolute maximum. This will allow sufficient time for questions and feedback. No powerpoint or other visual aids will be available. You can bring a 3x5 card with notes about your grounding assertions on it.

After Action

Some of you will find that you are good at making grounded assessments. For you the exercise confirms your skill. Others will find that you are not so good at this, and therefore you need to pay attention and practice it, exercising the "muscle" until it is strong.

When you have completed your claim-of-expertise presentation before the group, please provide me with a short report (1 page max) discussing what you learned:

- About yourself (your own capability, your manner of selling yourself, etc.)
- About the process (areas where people fail to ground, be relevant, listen to the group's standards; how common skillfulness at this is; etc.)