Expertise, Confidence and Humility

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The RTD (Rigorous Test Development) project is an attempt to build a professionalized content development practice that focuses on individual item quality, particularly by leaning into the importance of validity throughout the content development process. It assumes that content development professionals develop professional judgment that can be raised, honed and calibrated by providing frameworks and clarifying expectations in ways that account for the constraints and demands of typical practice within test development, today. RTD is a conscious and deliberate attempt to respond to the disparity in status, training and shared knowledgebases between psychometrically oriented professionals and content development professionals.

We have said "approaching the work with humility" and "Engaging with humility" and all kinds of minor differences in phrasing, but this idea of *humility in the work* in one of our oldest principles. It's the starting point for so much — for collaboration, for individual learning, for organizational learning. It's one of our original six principles — born of our observations about the major stumbling blocks to creating higher quality assessments.

More recently, however, some of our colleagues have pointed out that we do not talk enough the importance of *confidence*. And they are right: understanding the importance of humility in the work requires also understanding the importance of confidence in the work. They are two sides of the same coin, and each is needed in the work – especially because the work is a collaborative endeavor.

What is Expertise?

In fact, both humility and confidence are about expertise and one's relationship to expertise – one's own expertise and the expertise of others. There is no question that we believe in expertise and that we respect expertise. This truly is a deep value that we both hold. In fact, one of the original inspirations for the RTD project was our desire that the expertise of those who focus on content development work be respected like the expertise of those involved in other parts of assessment development and delivery.

Now, *expertise* is not the same thing as *intelligence*. It is not aptitude. It is not experience. It is not interest. These are things that can help when trying to do develop expertise, but none of the them are expertise, *itself*. They contribute to the development of expertise, but they cannot substitute for it.

So, what *is* expertise?
- Expertise is skill, knowledge, wisdom and the facility to deploy them.
- Expertise is defined within some *bounded* field, area or specialty.
- Expertise is relative, rather than absolute. That is, someone may be considered an expert on a topic when in a one group of people, and yet not be considered an expert on that same topic when in a group with different people.

For example, the wife of one of us is an employment attorney. As an attorney, some may consider her an expert in "the law," but she knows rather little about real estate law or maritime law. She *is* an expert in employment law. However, she has colleagues who know more about wage-hour law and more about benefits law (i.e., both sub-specialties within employment) than she does. She knows more about leaves of absence and harassment/discrimination laws (i.e., other sub-specialties) than they do. Her expertise is bounded and it is relative, as is everyone else's.

What is Humility?

Humility is about recognizing and being aware of the limits of one's own expertise. This includes:
- Recognizing that your expertise DOES have limits.
- Recognizing the greater expertise of others.

- Recognizing the areas of your own expertise — perhaps even fairly fine grained — both relative to each other and relative to the level of expertise of others.
- Recognizing when those limits suggest you should be listening or asking questions, as opposed to speaking or answering questions.

Of course, none of this recognition matters if it does not inform action. *Approaching the work with humility* starts with these kinds of recognitions and then moves to acting upon them. Humility means paying attention to the limits of your expertise so that you can think and act appropriately when you are in a context that lies beyond those limits.

What is Confidence?

Confidence is also about recognizing and being aware of the limits of one's expertise, only it is about acting appropriately when you are in a context that exists *within* those limits.

- Recognizing that one's expertise DOES exist.
- Recognizing the lesser expertise of others.
- Recognizing the areas of own's own expertise — perhaps even fairly fine grained — both relative to each other and relative to the level of expertise of others.
- Recognizing when those limits suggest one should be speaking or answering questions, as opposed to listening or asking questions.
- Recognizing when you *do* have something to contribute.

Of course, none of the his recognition matters if it does not inform action. *Approaching the work with humility* assumes that you also work with *confidence*. Confidence means paying attention to the existence of your expertise so that you can think and act appropriately when you are in a context that lies within those limits. That is, confidence is trusting the expertise you *do* have, depending on it and sharing it with others.

There is No Tension Between Humility and Confidence

Humility and confidence complement each other and work together quite well. We both believe that one of the most confident things that a person can do is to admit when they do not know something. Because they are secure with their expertise – and therefore that others should be able to recognize it – they do not put anything at risk when admitting their ignorance aloud or asking a question.

When you are confident in your expertise – when you believe that you have it and that it is meaningful – it should be quite easy to recognize that there are other forms of expertise that are similarly meaningful. Quite simply, the very principles that should lead others to respect your expertise should lead you to respect that of others. They are the same idea.

Having an exaggerated sense of your expertise is not confidence. It is foolishness. Similarly, failing to recognize the expertise that you *do* have is also foolishness. If you have a good sense of your own expertise – which is relative to the people around you – you can find where confidence and humility go hand in hand. Acting with appropriate confidence

and acting with appropriate humility requires awareness of your expertise, which means some degree of reevaluation as your context shifts – even as it shifts through the day. To be fair, the oft misunderstood Dunning-Kruger effect (1999) shows that it can be difficult for both high- and the low-ability individuals to accurately recognize their standing. But this merely underscores the importance of being mindful and careful when evaluating one's level of expertise – which, of course, is about more than just ability.

We often work with people who have different expertise(s) than we do. In fact, we do this most every day. We ask a lot of questions *and* we answer a lot of questions. We speak *and* we listen. When people bring different expertises to the table, there are endless opportunities to act from confidence and act from humility.

Expanding Expertise

Obviously, expertise can be acquired and can be developed, but it takes effort and time. Expertise comes from acquiring knowledge, honing skill and growing wisdom. Expertise is not merely a product of experience, as one can do something poorly for a long time. Rather, experience creates opportunities to develop expertise. Reflecting on that experience and seeking to acquire knowledge, hone skill and grow wisdom – doing that *work* is how one develops expertise. This includes examining past mistakes for lessons to be learned, examining past successes to better understand *why* they were successful (and perhaps how they could have been more successful) and deliberately making room for creative leaps. We often talk about letting the back of one's mind work over a problem, and we talk about the odd thoughts we have about things in odd moments. The progress and even eureka(!) moments that occur when doing the dishes or in the shower (or even elsewhere) are products of real work, though some if it may be less than fully conscious. Certainly, one does not become expert simply because one has an interest in something; it takes work.

Because expertise is a relative thing, there really is no end to this process. We know that at the highest levels that experts have fluency-- automaticity such that work actually gets *easier*-- but it can be a long road to reach that level. We know that along the way, we develop increasingly informed, fine and nuanced professional judgement – and we know that professional judgment is never done.

We have little doubt that developing expertise is a habit and mindset. We know artists, tradespeople, professionals, craftspeople, academics and others who have been deepening and/or expanding their expertise for decades. That is, sometimes they add new expertise that is closely related to their old expertise and something they become even more expert in an area in which they already had expertise.

Perhaps our favorite way to develop our own expertise is working with and learning from others. We actively listen and think hard about what is behind what they have said, including knowledge, principles, values, goals and priorities. We ask questions — both to get them to be more explicit and to signal that we want to better understand what they are saying. (e.g., "Does that mean…"). And we sometimes venture to speak beyond our

expertise, to invite them to help us to understand better (e.g., "I'm not sure about this…" or "Maybe…").

Expertise *can* be developed over time, and clearly it is not just about formal credentials. It is not just about formal experience. Those can help, but the real key is usually thoughtful deliberation combined with efforts to learn from those who came before. Obviously, the intent and interest is important, so long as they lead to the careful and reflective work — which itself usually requires its own form of humility.

Exhibiting Humility and Exhibiting Confidence

Obviously, while much of both humility and of confidence are internal and in how people think and process, much is also in how people behave. Showing and exhibiting appropriate humility and confidence is just incredibly important. Sometimes (it saddens us to say), it is more important than feeling them.

Quite unfairly – radically unfairly – exhibitions of humility and confidence are not always seen equally when they come from different people. Societal expectations get ingrained into each of us, to at least some degrees, and these expectations are determined by far too many things beyond a person's control. As a highly credentialed white man and a highly credentialed white woman, we see in our own lives how our behaviors are received differently. One of us has been married to a highly credential woman of color for 20 years and all three of us have seen how she is received by others. (There has been fascinating work done learning from the experience of transexual people and how their expertise is perceived differently before and after they transition, as in Kristin Schilt's 2011 book, *Just One of the Guys?*)

We do not point this out to whine or complain about these realities. Rather, we acknowledge that women[1], people of color and members of other less dominant groups often face a more complicated landscape when trying to navigate how to appropriately exhibit confidence and when trying to trying to navigate how to appropriately exhibit humility. Yes, men – and white men – can have their perfectly clear and obvious *appropriate* exhibitions of confidence and/or humility misunderstood, but it is less likely and there is less risk of negative consequences.

We know that it can be easier in our culture for men to develop confidence – sometimes to the point that it turns into foolishness. And we know that our culture can encourage women to develop humility – sometimes to the point that it turns into foolishness. We know that people of color face similar societal pressures. Of course, all of these pitfalls are available to member of any group, but these risks just are not equal.

Hence, we know that humility and confidence interact with people's demographics, personality, presentation and reputation. Finding a way to successfully exhibit humility and to successfully exhibit confidence is part of the challenge, and the degree of that

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[1] Needless to say, non-binary and gender non-conforming people, and transsexual men and women all have to deal with internalized and externally imposed societal expectations around gender. The issues there are quite similar, though they interact in different contexts and with different internal and external psychologies and norms.

challenge *is* unfairly distributed. Nonetheless, the most successful sorts of collaboration – and test development *is* collaborative work – depend upon it.

Developing Humility and Developing Confidence

As leaders, supervisors, mentors and coaches, it is obviously part of our jobs to support the further development of expertise in others. Sometimes we do this more directly, and sometimes we focus more on creating opportunities for them to use to develop their own expertise further. As we try to grow the capacities of our organizations and our teams, helping people to develop greater and deeper expertise is one of main strategies we use.

Supporting this kind of growth and development in others is personally difficult because we are so mindful of the verbal ticks and habits we ourselves have learned so as not to trigger accusations of arrogance (often gendered). Each of us – and so many of our dear family, friends and colleagues – have faced backlash that truly was uncalled for, simply for demonstrating some appropriate confidence in our hard earned expertise. One of us has had the experience of making a point in a big meeting, seeing it brushed past, and then only a moment later hearing a colleague of the opposite gender make literally the exact same point – even using 85% of the exact same words – and receive actual applause for the idea. (We leave it to your figure out which of us it was, though we understand that it might not be entirely obvious.) We do not want to set up *anyone* for the kinds of unfair negative consequences we have faced.

Nevertheless, developing appropriate confidence and humility across our teams is almost as important as developing expertise, itself. When the work is part of a collaborative effort, when the final product is the result of a team's work, people have to recognize when it is their turn to contribute and recognize when it is time to trust the contributions of others. This requires everyone to develop both accurate understandings of their own expertise and that of their colleagues and other partners.

Developing confidence and/or humility can be a greater challenge than developing expertise. It gets to our self-images, our egos and our various insecurities. It requires rethinking our understanding of ourselves. Similarly, it can require use to rethink our evaluations of others – especially as our own expertise grows. Old pattern and relationships must develop as expertise and confidence develops.

As our colleagues grow and develop their expertise and their confidence, we too try to stay be ready for our relationships with them to develop, as well.