The session will address the issue of tacit knowledge in academic writing, and I will suggest that much of the disciplinary knowledge of writing in a discipline is based on tacit knowledge.

There are then two questions:

**Can it be made overt?**
**Should it be made overt?**

Husain and Waterfield (Royal Literary Fund, ‘Writing Matters’, p. 27) write:

“First-year students feel that the key to success lies not in producing a well-structured and well-written piece but in complying with some mysterious tacit code which they cannot access.”

Examples of tacit knowledge are:

“We can know more than we can tell” (Polanyi)
“Knowing in action” (Schon and Argyris)
Connoisseurship and criticism in evaluation (Eisner)
M. Eraut, in “Non-formal learning and tacit knowledge in professional work”, Brit. J. Educ. Psychology 70 (2000), pp. 113-136, has suggested that tacit knowledge is used when knowledge is acquired by implicit learning of which the knower is unaware. That arguably occurs in teaching.

One more quotation:

“There are things that I know that I know;
There are things that I know that I don’t know;
There are things that I don’t know that I know;
And there are things that I don’t know that I don’t know.”

(Donald Rumsfeld)

Is any of these ‘tacit knowledge’?

How I stumbled into the issue of tacit knowledge years ago:

I had been asked by staff in a Sociology Dept to introduce incoming students in Freshers week to essay writing. This seemed to me unlikely to be effective and so I suggested instead that two of their staff should discuss ‘essay writing’ with me in front of the students. At the end of the session, one of the staff said to me: “I don’t know what they learned, but I learned a lot.” Did I unlock tacit knowledge?
The status of words (the fundamental building blocks of academic writing):

“In principio erat verbum”, St John’s Gospel
“Das Wort, sie sollen lassen stahn”, Luther, Eine feste Burg

But in contrast:

“Words, words, words”, Shakespeare, Hamlet
“Im Anfang war die Tat”, Goethe, Faust
“Sticks and stones may hurt your bones,
But words can never hurt you”

I have deliberately quoted in the original; translations distort. Indeed, the Vulgate differs significantly from the Greek original: Vulgate has “verbum erat apud deum et verbum erat deus”, while Greek reverses ‘verbum’ and ‘deus’:

Ἐν αἴρχῃ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος

How can we make tacit knowledge overt?
Peggy Nightingale, in “Understanding Processes and Problems in Student Writing”, Studies in higher Education 13 (1988), p. 266, addresses:

“one of the myths perpetuated by people who wish to encourage improved communication skills, but who seek a relatively straightforward resolution to the problem. Not only do they assume that the problem is with basic skills,…but they neglect the considerable body of informed opinion which argues that the language which students generate when they speak and write is as important in their learning as the language which they read and hear….Teachers should assign writing and speaking tasks which assist in assessing whether students have learned….Students need to acquire new vocabularies and to employ styles as required by varying subjects. No ‘writing’ teacher (usually in an English department) … is able to address all these specific demands.”

This does not deny the value of the work of such teachers, and I have learned much from Colleen McKenna at the Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching at UCL.
The point has been taken up nearly twenty years later by Tamsin Haggis, “Pedagogies for diversity: retaining critical challenge amidst fears of ‘dumbing down’” (Studies in Higher Education 31, 2006, pp. 521-535), who writes:

“What is potentially difficult for some students is that these underlying principles are usually only implicit in course outlines, assessment instructions and assumptions about the structuring of work, and are therefore difficult for those unfamiliar with the discourse to see and understand.”

“…embedded, processual complexities of thinking, understanding, and acting in specific disciplinary contexts need to be explored as an integral part of academic content teaching within the disciplines themselves.”

“…it is unlikely that two academics even in the same field would articulate and model such processes in exactly the same way….such processes are partly hidden even from academics themselves…”

“…it is the responsibility of the teacher, not the learner, to consider what might need to be changed…”
Should we make tacit knowledge more overt? If so, how? If not, how can we deal with it?

Many years ago, Swale analysed the introductions to scientific papers and noted that nearly all were in four steps: introduction to field; particular issue being tackled; outcomes; future work. Authors apparently were not aware of this consistent pattern; indeed, when they were and deliberately followed it, the results were constraining. I went back over all my physics papers and found that – with one exception – I had followed this pattern without being aware of it! The exception was a joint paper where my co-author had done the writing. Although he was clearly the better physicist of the two of us, I was – unconsciously – the better writer.

My conclusion is that making tacit knowledge overt can distort it. We have to be aware of this, when we do it. But how can we detect this, replace the tacit by agreed overt knowledge and pass it on? Or is the best that we can do

“to pass the parcel. That’s sometimes all you can do. Take it, feel it and pass it on.”
(Alan Bennett, *The History Boys*)

**Can tacit knowledge be made overt?**
*Should it be made overt?*
*How can it be made more overt?*
Collaboration – Discipline & Writing Experts

A proposal:

1. Discipline experts submit samples to Writing expert.

2. Writing expert suggests underlying principles.

3. Discussion makes principles overt.

4. Agreed principles discussed with students.

5. Students write samples.

6. Agreement between all parties.

Let’s discuss!
Can Enquiry-Based Learning help?

Authority is not the teacher but the evidence

Students interrogate evidence

Students discuss evidence

Teacher listens and comments

Teacher learns

Students learn

Let’s discuss!