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The Forgotten Clients

Fall 2005 / Focus

by *Bonnie Devet*

How best might a writing lab director serve her consultants? Here's one answer.



Bonnie Devet

Desperately waving a draft, a client standing in the doorway exclaims, "Can someone help me with my commas? My essay's due in 10 minutes!" The last-minute student is infamous and, unfortunately, extremely common in most writing labs, as are a few other types: the socialite who, instead of working on her freshman English essay, wants only to discuss the latest campus gossip; the older, non-traditional student anxiously seeking reassurance; the international student needing help with American rhetoric. Although many kinds of clients exist (with the list being long and legendary), labs help all of them in two fundamental ways: to discover their roles as students and to learn about the writing process.

As a lab director for almost twenty years, I have found that there is another group of clients; however, they are often forgotten—the peer consultants or tutors themselves. They are frequently overlooked because, as successful students, they have learned how to negotiate the academy's demands, or they would not have been hired to work in the lab in the first place. Then, too, they are likely to be good writers, or they would not have the grades to qualify as tutors. So, in rushing to train consultants, directors all too often forget that these students are, indeed, clients, who, like the others seeking the lab's assistance, need help in learning a role; in the consultants' case, however, it is not how to be students but how to grow as tutors. And even though they are good writers, they, too, can, like the "other" clients, learn even more about the writing process, with directors' widening the tutors' perspective on the craft of composing and the nature of academic writing.

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Learning About Their Roles

My experience shows that most consultants assume they understand all about how to be tutors once they have completed the basic training that covers such topics as avoiding proofreading, showing empathy, being a good listener, and using resources. But, as all directors know, learning to be a consultant is the classic never-ending-story, in which tutors are always on a learning curve, or should be, if they want to give clients excellent help. How, then, can directors encourage trained tutors to keep thinking and rethinking about what it means to be a consultant?

Debriefing works well. On a daily or even weekly basis, I find it useful to call consultants aside to inquire about their latest sessions. Following a business model of handling personnel, I do not ask "How did the sessions go?" This wording, according to business management literature, would elicit only the vague "Ok" or "Fine" because workers do not want to look bad by mentioning difficulties. So that consultants have a chance to brag as well as to reflect on what they have done with clients, I ask questions that do not elicit only one-word answers, such as, "What do you think was your best technique you used with the last client?" "What problems did you encounter?" and, then, "If you could re-do the last session, what would you do differently?" Each of these questions evokes long responses. As consultants talk, they begin to understand what they have done well or not so well in their sessions. Such self-reflection is an effective means to learning.

Another technique is to ask consultants to create a treasure hunt exercise for the next group of newly hired tutors (Devet). For this exercise, consultants write down five questions they have been asked by clients, questions newly hired tutors should be able to answer. An example would be, "I don't know how to write a good title for my paper. Can you help me?" Consultants then create a key telling where to find the answer in the lab ("Go to the brown file cabinet to the left of the computers and pull out the handout on "Effective Titles") and what answers to give the client ("Use a working title first, perhaps condensing your thesis; start with a one-word title and build up the title word by word; use alliteration to create a witty title; do not over promise"). In this exercise, consultants "slow down [to] reflect on details [they] had already internalized as a tutor" (Devet 15). They also learn even more about the lab's resources; one consultant said that, until he wrote the treasure hunt exercise for newly hired tutors, he did not realize the lab's files contained a handout about writing titles.

Another way to show consultants that they are growing as tutors is to suggest that they follow the tutor certification criteria from the national organization **College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA)**. Each level of certification offered by the CRLA (regular, advanced, and master) helps consultants to progress in their training. After completing the regular (or first level) topics, such as basic tutoring dos and don'ts, role modeling, and critical thinking skills, consultants move on to the advanced and master levels where they read articles about composition theory, write for publication, and make presentations at conferences (CRLA). Having established steps at each level

shows consultants their increased sophistication as tutors.

Learning Even More about Writing

Consultants are good writers, but they need to learn even more about the processes of composing so they can better serve clients. Although they know from their training that they are “consultants” acting like audiences for clients who will talk through ideas or read aloud papers, I still find the dominant feeling among tutors is that writing is primarily a solitary act done in Lunsford’s famous garret: to many tutors, writers are inspired Romantic poets. After all, as successful students, they think that they write that way, too. So, as a director, I need to expand the consultants’ perceptions, helping tutors understand that writing can also be seen as socially constructed, with writers and readers arriving at a consensus of the truth. To help tutors understand this view of writing, I demonstrate the process. If a consultant, for example, is struggling to explain what is causing a client’s sentence to read awkwardly, I slip into a chair next to both client and consultant, and reassuringly say to the client, “Isn’t it terrific to have all these people who want to help!” Then, I ask both client and consultant to explain what is troubling them, so we all can work on it together. Clients, and more importantly, consultants, learn that it is ok to talk over different ways to write. Such talk demonstrates that knowledge and writing are created through a give-and-take, revealing the socially based nature of writing, a concept about which most consultants are little aware.

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Consultants also need to learn about different types of writing. When first hired, tutors, all too frequently, think there is a generic form of college writing called only “academic writing.” But this vague, overly general label does not serve them as they struggle to help clients with papers in specific disciplines, such as English, Biology, Communication (especially newspaper articles), or History. So, I hold training sessions, using the now-overly-famous composition classification first espoused by James Kinneavy: grouping writings by purpose or aim. Consultants learn there is expressive writing (which helps with English papers); trans-active writing (such as Biology lab reports); informative writing (like most news stories), and persuasive writing (such as History papers arguing the causes for a particular war).

Conclusion

In racing to get labs up and running each term, directors sometimes forget consultants are clients, perhaps not the students who frantically wave their papers in the air, nor the socialites seeking friendship, nor any of the others who frequent labs. Still, consultants are special clients needing to understand both their roles as tutors and the sophisticated nature of the writing process itself. Directors, then, should see that these forgotten clients need a lab as much as a lab needs them.

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