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James Bond Consultants in a Writing Lab

Fall 2006 / Training

by **Bonnie Devet**, *College of Charleston*

A writing center director reveals a training technique in which consultants go "undercover" to gain valuable insight into consulting work.



Bonnie Devet

It's spring, and nature's sweet ritual is underway. Daffodils are blooming, azaleas are flowering, dogwoods promise to appear shortly.

During spring, writing lab directors are undergoing their own ritual. They are gathering names of students from faculty who have been nominated for the job of tutor, interviewing these prospective consultants, and, finally, making job offers to the best and the brightest in order to secure the new crop of tutors for the fast-approaching fall. Directors can now catch their breaths, assuming that training can wait until the fall.

But can it?

As a director of a writing center, I've learned not to wait until the fall but rather to use the last precious weeks of the spring term to expose newly selected consultants to the world of consulting, so they can begin, even now their process of becoming well-trained consultants.

Here's why. During the initial interview process with new tutors, I always conduct a mock tutorial, role-playing a client while the interviewees act as the consultants. If the interviewees do well, I hire them. These newly-hired consultants, however, have not gained a full sense of a consultation through

this process; they need to experience a real tutorial from the clients' point of view . So, in late spring, I ask my newly hired consultants to take one of their papers to the Writing Lab and participate in a full-fledged consultation. Here's the novelty of this training approach. During the session, the newly-hired consultants do not tell their consultants that they are going to be working there in the fall. Undercover, the newly selected tutors can then experience genuine consultations.

I recently carried out this training technique with five undercover hirees, who visited the Lab with a variety of paper topics: Beowulf; Charlotte P. Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"; George Elliot's Middlemarch; the architecture of a Charleston, SC, neighborhood; Emily Dickinson's "465"; and a comparison of NAFTA with the European Union. Because I read all the consultants' progress reports, I was able to recognize when the newly-hired ones had had a chance to savor the one-on-one help that is the hallmark of any writing lab. Immediately after their visits, I e-mailed the new consultants to ask: "How did the session go? What do you feel you gained from the experience?"

Benefits for Newly Hired Tutors

Going undercover provided several benefits to the newly-selected tutors. When interviewing the prospective consultants, I stressed that the lab's key job is to be there next to clients on the sometimes long journey of writing, all without intimidating or judging clients. Consultants should also encourage and reassure, making clients feel completely capable of producing quality work. It is only when newly hired consultants attend a legitimate session that they understand this role. I was gratified when a new consultant reported that he had experienced this emotional satisfaction: "I didn't have much done on my paper (It's not due for a few weeks.), but it was good to know that I was probably on the right track." By receiving this reassurance with their own work, the new tutor has a better understanding of a tutorial's affective power.

My mock sessions during the interview process fall short in another way. By default, it is only a pretend session, with Dr. Devet just play-acting a student; interviewees sometimes even get the giggles.

So, I have always suspected that nominees were having a difficult time seeing beyond this simulated activity in order to sense the true nature of consulting work. When participating in the real thing, though, new tutors see the consultation differently. After seeking the lab's help, one of the newly-selected tutors noted, "The role of a consultant seems to be to make people realize habits that negatively affect their writing and encourage them to change." This new consultant seems to have realized that tutors help not just the writing but the writer, as the overly famous writing lab mantra so succinctly and accurately states .

Another concern I have always had was that the newly hired tutors might not be fully informed about the writing process. As top-notch students, they have performed exceptionally well, absorbing through osmosis how to write. Because writing has been easy for them, they need to understand that the process is complicated, and that all writers—no matter how successful they have been—can learn ways to improve their own processes. After the undercover sessions, the newly-hired consultants do discover a basic concept about the writing process: all papers are works in progress. A new consultant explained:

It was interesting to review one of my short papers with a consultant and see that no paper is perfect, no matter how much it may seem to you at the moment you were writing it. It is easy to get locked into a certain way of writing without examining how your choice of words or syntax affects how well you express yourself.

Through only one visit, this hire—a top-notch English major—had learned to improve his own writing process. Another new tutor reported that although she went to her session with just a few specific questions, “I definitely got some questions answered. And, in addition, I realized I needed to fix my introductory paragraph.” She understood that all writers—no matter how experienced they may be—can receive help at a lab.

The newly hired workers also acquired tutoring techniques from the experienced consultants. A Political Science major was impressed by her consultant’s style: “My trip to the Lab was wonderful. My consultant really helped me a lot, and it was amazing how much he picked up from my paper after listening to it only once.” Another new tutor came to understand how a tutorial procedure helps the writing process: “Reading my paper aloud to the consultant really enabled me to find errors in the paper that I had previously missed in proofreading it. It was a worthwhile trip to the Lab.” Now, when she helps her own clients, she will be better able to explain the importance of this procedure.

The undercover sessions also revealed the importance of projecting a friendly, helpful attitude towards clients. After all, clients muster great courage to enter a lab, seeking help from other writers. A newly hired consultant learned how she, too, had to overcome her own fears about seeking assistance at the lab: “I thought it might be a little intimidating to go get help, but it was not at all, and that made me feel good.” This new tutor has gained empathy for her clients’ vulnerability when showing others their writings.

Disadvantages to Using Undercover Tutors

It must be admitted that this undercover training technique poses some disadvantages. It takes a great deal of effort to keep track of when the newly hired consultants had come into the lab for their sessions and then, in turn, to find an opportunity to follow up with them. Because it was near the end of the term when many papers and projects are due, the newly-selected consultants did not always respond in a timely fashion. I had to e-mail them several times, constantly reminding them to send me their insights. Sending these reminders proved time consuming.

In spite of these drawbacks, the benefits have outweighed the difficulties. The newly-hired workers are already on their way to becoming consultants. When they receive full writing lab training in the fall, they will be miles along towards being effective consultants. For they have felt the emotional boost a lab visit provides, they have learned about the writing process just as clients do, and they have acquired a few tutorial techniques to employ as tutors. In all honesty, I would once again train new tutors with this undercover (or as I like to think of it) “James Bond” technique.

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