


RESEARCH NOTE

Then and now: The relevance of the writing consultant experience today

Gerhardus D. du Preez 
E-mail: gerhardusdavid@yahoo.com

When I started at as a writing consultant at Stellenbosch University's Writing Lab, I had no idea how beneficial the experience would be in the years to follow, and especially now. For the past two years, I have been working as an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher in an English training centre for adults (specifically for the business market) in Jiangsu, China. Our centre aims not only to teach English as a foreign language, but also to try to instil language learning as a skill within our students. Language learning is a subjective experience where every student struggles with a different facet of the language, and the process of learning varies from student to student. Hence, as an instructor, I take on the role of facilitator rather than teacher.

In my current professional set-up, I fall back on my writing-consultant training on a daily basis. The spaces in which I find myself teaching have a major influence on the power dynamics between teacher and student – a delicate dynamic which has to be manipulated by the teacher/facilitator to remain in equilibrium at all times. In retrospect, I realise that a lot of my techniques and processes of handling the power relationship between student and teacher are derived from my three years of experience at the Writing Lab. And so I gladly share my “then” and “now” with you.

At the current centre where I am teaching, the classrooms are designed so that the lessons are student-orientated rather than teacher-focused. The classrooms for private lessons can accommodate four students at a time, but I work with students on a one-to-one basis more often than not. These classrooms contain a round table, five seats (one for the teacher and four for the attending students), a computerised television screen, and a white writing board. When I first saw the layout of these classrooms and the space in which I would teach, I immediately thought of the consulting rooms at the Writing Lab. I knew that the experiences to come would not be brand new, and I was confident and comfortable to take on the more intimate teaching style.

During my first few lessons at the round table, I suppressed the King Arthur inside by reverting to writing-consultant mode and establishing an egalitarian relationship with the students – we are all knights on a quest. Rose and Sharifa, who were my mentors at the Writing Lab, always emphasised the importance of dynamics between consultant and student. The training and guidance they offered, accompanied with my personal experience through many hours of writing consultations, taught me that the most effective way to achieve optimal results in a consultation is to first establish a personal connection with the student – to bring them into a

temporal and spatial “friend zone”, so to speak. This technique has been of immense value in my work now, especially when working with adults. By winning the trust and confidence of the student, the motivation and encouragement that you as language facilitator reciprocate is so much more powerful and effective.

Winning trust and confidence entails more than just a casual “How are you today?” or general small talk. It involves zooming in on the unspoken communication of the student, not only that directed to you as a teacher, facilitator, or consultant, but also the discourse that the individual communicates knowingly or unknowingly to the world. This technique is also something that I picked up during my years at the Writing Lab. But there is a particular experience that I remember which made a notable impression on me: it was right at the beginning when the new batch of consultants (of whom I was a part) were in their first week of training at the Writing Lab. We were still finding our feet and getting to know one another. I had a packet of tissues with me which had the appearance of US Dollar bills. In one of our breaks during the training, Sharifa approached me and commented on my tissues. She also mentioned some other positive observations that she had made of me. That early recognition that she gave me, and the conversation that we had, broke down barriers between me and the organisation which I was about to work for. It made me feel a sense of belonging as a writing consultant from a very early stage. As a result, I felt confident to talk to Rose and Sharifa whenever I had a work-related (or sometimes personal) problem.

While teaching, I try to relate to students to bring down barriers and to make the education environment less intimidating. As Sharifa did with my tissues, I try to note the unspoken communication of the student. Small details of an individual open up worlds of understanding and relations. Commenting on a very interesting, playful-looking pen used by a student in class can reveal that the student is a mother of a primary-school-going girl – a goldmine of topics to relate to when practising or rehearsing speaking patterns and conversation techniques. Also, it opens enough doors to get to know the student and to let them get to know you. This establishes a relationship of trust and comradeship: “we are in this together”. Hence, I always spend the first five to 10 minutes of the lesson getting into their world, and making sure that a comfortable pathway of learning is laid out.

Rose and Sharifa always talked about “tea-therapy” when a consultation goes wrong or when the student reaches breaking point during the consultation. At the Writing Lab, these kinds of consultations were unavoidable. I remember encountering students bursting into tears because they were struggling to pass essays or subjects, were dealing with threats from their parents¹, or were just feeling helpless. In these scenarios, I was trained to attend to the immediate needs of the student (*but not to be their psychologist*) and, if necessary, discard the writing agenda for the remaining time. Today, I still fall back on that training in how to manage these situations. However, today I am faced with divorces, unhappy relationships, and employees who are over-utilised and drained by their employers. A constant reminder then is that I am not here to save the world but to teach English. So, I then take a breath, stop the lesson, get some tea or hot water (you can solve anything in China with a cup of hot water), and just let the student talk about whatever they want, even if it is their feelings and experiences.

¹ “My father said I must come back home if I fail another module” – one incident that I remember very vividly.

Although these are just snippets of my experiences back in the day as well as of my current reality, I believe that they show that when I started as a writing consultant in 2011, I was not only given the opportunity to do a part-time job at the university, but I was also given a set of tools. There are many toolboxes in one's life, each from a different experience. Einstein said that the only source of knowledge is experience. Whether I completely agree with that, I do not know. But one thing is certain: that the current chapter I am writing in my life definitely draws from my experience seven years ago in a yellow room, at a round table, next to a student whom I am helping to meet an objective.