

Editorial Training: Stuck in a Time Warp?

Every so often you get a flash of insight.

The issue that this particular flash illuminated had been nagging away since I first took soundings about selling my training business. “Why should I run your training course?” asked one doctor I thought might be interested. “I would rather write my own.”

Publishers were no more enthusiastic, with two having a similar reaction: “Why should we buy your business? The only real asset is you—and you won’t be there.”

I couldn’t understand why they didn’t see that there was much more to my training than me standing up all day and performing. What about the range of nearly 10 courses on writing and editing for health professionals that I had developed? What about the loyal customer base with 60% return business? What about the major changes we had made as we learned from detailed feedback from some 1,000 courses?

I decided not to try to sell the business but instead to run some Train the Trainer courses. At the end of it, participants would have a licence to use all the material I had developed, including fliers, confirmation letters, course book, overheads, and tutor notes. Eight attended, six of them doctors.

Early in the second day, when delegates started to practice giving the course, we hit the hurdle. “I really find it hard to deliver other people’s materials,” said one doctor. “So do I,” said another. “I feel like it’s suppressing my personality,” said a third.

Here was the crux of the matter. They clearly felt that to train properly, they had to write their material themselves. So what was going on here? As a trained trainer, I have no doubt that courses have two distinct components: the content and the delivery. Good content is not just what the trainer fancies saying but is carefully constructed from an analysis of the training needs, a clear statement of goal and objectives, and a variety of learning techniques designed to help participants to achieve them (and have fun). There is no reason why the person who constructs the course should be the person who delivers it, and vice versa.

Take the world of music, where the likes of Chopin and Beethoven provide the basic content, and the likes of Arthur Brendel

and Murray Perahia deliver it. As far as I am aware, they do not complain about having to work with someone else’s notes.

If musicians are happy with the distinction between content and delivery, so, I suspect, would be people in other occupations, such as engineers and police officers. But why not doctors?

My instinct is that their reaction represented the remnants of the apprenticeship system. Most aspects of medical training are now highly formalized, with textbooks, curricula, examining boards, independent examiners, professional educationalists, and other paraphernalia of our paper-qualification society.

But not when it comes to medical writing and editing. Somehow the skills and knowledge needed—important though they are for the advancement of knowledge and of individual careers—are exempt from such trappings. Here, the spirit of apprenticeship still rules, and there is plenty of room for power and patronage (as often expressed by an idiosyncratic wielding of the red pen).

It remains generally an oral culture. (When I suggested writing a textbook based on my course for editors, the peer reviewers—senior editors—advised the publisher that there wouldn’t be a market!)

Happily, times are changing. Organizations like the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME), the Committee on Publication Ethics, the European Association of Science Editors, and CSE are producing guidelines (which after all are codified bits of agreed knowledge), and these are beginning to push out what has been a traditionally oral culture. New courses are proliferating (and someone at this moment is no doubt working on that textbook of editing). But it’s all very slow, and the WAME network still resonates to such basic questions as “What is the maximum number of authors for a paper?” and “What does an editorial board do?”

I am confident that, over the next few years, the importance of good training and high standards for medical writing and editing will become recognized, and there will be greater formalization. Meanwhile, it would be good if the art of writing a training course were to become as highly valued as the art of delivering it.

TIM ALBERT has retired from running courses. The third edition of his book on writing for journals, *Winning the Publications Game*, has just been published by Radcliffe Publishing.