

RESEARCH NOTE

Clear mind, full head, can't lose

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I worked as a consultant at Stellenbosch University's Writing Lab from 2006 to 2008 whilst writing my doctoral thesis in Zoology. Being of French citizenship, I worked with many exchange students who, like me at some stages of my writing, needed a guiding light in the dark alley that is writing, especially in a foreign language. I could relate to these students' angst, the fear of the blank page, of the words that do not ever feel right. During these consultations, I discovered the power of listening rather than talking, of gaining a greater understanding of what the writer in front of me was trying to portray, and the best ways to make sure his or her message would not be lost. Perhaps the greatest value I developed through working at the Writing Lab was how to be a better listener, and to actively care about the thoughts of others. I became much more sensitive than I used to be when reading and responding to the anxieties of those around me, whether it was overwhelming undergraduate students with too much information or fellow postgraduate students who had mastered the art of procrastination.

Interestingly, it also brought me back to the basics of writing, so beautifully expressed by the French poet Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux: "Whatever we conceive well we express clearly, and words flow with ease". This has since formed the blueprint of my interactions with the students I have taught and supervised as I progressed up the academic ladder. Over the years, working with students of various backgrounds whose first language is not English has now become the rule rather than the exception. Relating to my experiences as a student or as a consultant has helped me to create a space for discussion and connection with the students, to help them develop arguments, hone their writing voices, and revise their work for greater clarity.

Finally, yet importantly, my work at the Writing Lab greatly influenced my own academic writing, particularly during the development stages and revision process. I came to recognise that revision involves the critical evaluation of one's own ideas, which is perhaps the most difficult self-assessment to achieve. Revision then became, to my eyes, a process of change and development rather than a simple "cut, delete, paste" action. This newly acquired appreciation of the intrinsic value of reviewing enabled me to reach out to my peers more easily, and to make drastic changes to my own work without batting too much of an eye. This was a much needed skill as I advanced in my career but also a concept I have always tried to pass on to my students in their winding road to critical and independent thinking.