

Consulting Informs Best Practice in Academia

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ABSTRACT

The Conversational Plenary Session began with a clear agenda of describing the process and challenge of developing eLearning and eTraining. After a brief discussion of the benefits and challenges of the modality, the conversation quickly segued to a highly spirited conversation related to consulting and the negative implications when one calls oneself a consultant. In fact, this became an integral theme of multiple discussions throughout the rest of the conference. This author strives to identify a selection of literature which supports the viewpoint that consulting does indeed inform best practices in academia. Those professors with up-to-the-minute consultancies in their fields offer an enriched experience for their students.

Keywords: Consultant, Consultancy, Course Enrichment, eLearning, eTraining, Academia College Teaching.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Conversational Plenary Session began with a description of the challenges of eLearning and eConsulting: Developing and Delivering “e” Solutions. When one chooses to participate in the “e” arena, there are many built-in challenges. Often, clients are at a distance, which creates special circumstances from the beginning. It is much easier to negotiate contracts, to meet with subject matter experts, and to develop eLearning when in a face-to-face environment. Although we have face-to-face online tools such as Skype and Google Hangouts, available both on the computer and on smartphones, this meeting modality does not necessarily suffice so as to achieve intended goals.

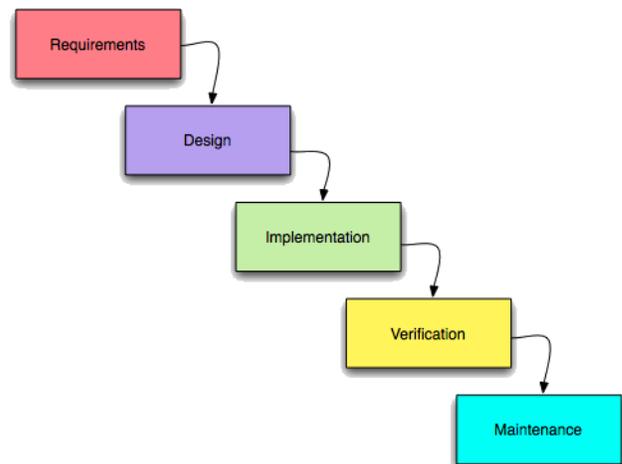
2. CHALLENGES OF eCONSULTING

The eConsultant is not a magician. Without a clear understanding between the client and the eConsultant of what is to be accomplished from beginning to end, with clear objectives and challenges, the project will result in failure. With the face-to-face component missing, it’s hard to guess at what the needs and wants are. It is more challenging to facilitate an effective needs analysis in a face-to-face setting. Furthermore, even when clients know what they need in the end, they are not experts in working with the technology and do not understand the project plan timeline/process required to meet their goals.

For instance, when migrating existing eLearning to a new Learning Management System (LMS), there is a lot of testing and debugging and retesting, as well as beta testing to determine exactly what is needed to deliver a satisfactory result. The same is true in terms of updating courses to align with standards for the American with Disability Act 508 Compliance [1].

Furthermore, perhaps one of the biggest challenges occurs when the eConsultant is given the task of developing courses that have more “student friendly” design. What constitutes “student friendly” design? Since this is so subjective, it requires careful evaluation, collaboration, and review by designers, and practitioners, as well as clear communication between the client and the eConsultant.

Finally, the eConsulting Model may utilize the standard Waterfall Model with phases including: Requirements, Design, Implementation, Verification, and Maintenance. This representation of the development cycle for eConsulting is suitable. During Maintenance stage, the client may decide to pursue an additional project. For this reason, from the beginning, the eConsultant needs to clearly define the scope of the project, so as to avoid scope creep.



[2] Figure 1. Waterfall Model. This figure illustrates a basic consulting model.

3. SEGUE TO CONSULTING CONVERSATION

“The Conversational Plenary Session is akin to intellectually shared Jazz” [3]. The topic of interest of the populous was that of consulting, in general. That’s when the intellectual discourse started.

What’s a consultant? According to Straits [4], “For many years, when an executive loses a job, in order to show that they are still engaged in business, they create a consulting firm...Unfortunately, the word “consultant” has almost become a pejorative”. The conversation started with this line of thinking, but quickly moved forward to embrace the view that college professors practicing in their fields as consultants bring value to their students. Still, there was some extended lingering related to the former viewpoint.

Regardless, this author has clear vision around the value of consulting as it relates to academia and teaching the next generation. Personal experience dictates this grounded opinion. In graduate school (whether we are discussing a master's degree completed in 1982, or a doctorate completed in 2006), those professors with "fresh" experience to share from their field of expertise where they were practicing consultants, informed learning, engaged students, and provided academic and field-based credibility.

Dr. Susan Baile who taught Therapeutic Communication (much like counseling or psychology) and her consulting with children in communication counseling and therapy provided a practice-based foundation for the course based on her work and the application of communication theory.

Dr. Michael Albright in Research Policies and Practices used the "Paul Harvey" method – and "now you know the rest of the story" – to effectively integrate his own case studies from the field. His methodology consisted of presenting his students with the problem and letting them determine the best solution based on the information provided. However, what made the class so highly engaging was that Albright provided the rest of the story, including what was done in the end, and explained the outcome(s). "The bizarre but true stories from our consulting world provide excellent analogies for classroom learning, and feedback from students about the consulting experiences reaffirms the power of using stories for teaching" [5].

Dr. Lloyd Rieber in Instructional Technology divided students into groups to develop curriculum. His own expertise from working in the field with clients and his "Studio Approach" at the University of Georgia guided his teaching practice. The "Studio Approach" was a shared experience between outside companies and student groups to complete an authentic learning experience [6]. This is akin to students working as consultants.

These were three personal examples within the scope of this author's graduate education. This consulting experience allows students to practice their skills, work collaboratively as teams, and enhance their resumes. They have gleaned real world experience in the field, in the process of completing their degrees.

Consider the notion of an entire university basing their programs on a consultancy for learning model. Fielding Graduate University bases their programs on "...the ability of ... students to apply their knowledge and skills to address local issues... This scholar-practitioner model of learning is what Fielding is known for. It brings research and experience tightly together to serve very practical social needs" [7]. Not only should professors be required to consult, but also students should be required to consult so they may have this enrichment experience tied to their learning and preparedness to meet the demands in the workplace upon graduation.

This author would argue that to keep college professors current in their respective fields and aligned with what is expected of future graduating students, it is essential that they consult. "Rather than viewing consulting as an extracurricular or separate activity from teaching and research, faculty and students can be better served when consulting is perceived as part of the educational process" [8]. Without consulting in the field, especially in the fields of business, technology or engineering (and related fields), the professor quickly becomes

out of touch and is challenged to stay current in the field [9]. However, this same professor can regain and maintain skills through active and engaged consulting, thereby redeeming him/herself. "This interaction between the two environments [academia and consultancy] keeps educators aligned with current issues and concerns of business [technology, engineering] and industry while creating innovative teaching strategies." Not unlike the personal example with Dr. Michael Albright described above, "The use of actual, real-world experiences in the classroom provides a vehicle for course content application and helps the educator validate what is being taught" [8].

In summary, a thoughtful and accurate description describing the importance of faculty consulting would be: "...a natural extension and application of one's professional or scholarly expertise outside the academic institution and as an important form of public service that long has been recognized as a legitimate extension of faculty role and responsibility. Viewed in this way, faculty consulting relates directly not only to the intellectual, social, psychological, and economic well-being of the individual faculty member but also to the tripartite mission of most academic institutions (i.e., teaching, research, and service)" [10].

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