

Mentoring as Empowering: The Mentoring of Translation Consultants-in-Training

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ABSTRACT

In the present paper, Dr. Fritz Goerling, an SIL international translation consultant in French-speaking West Africa shares from his experience of officially mentoring translation consultants-in-training by empowering them in interpersonal skills, translation and communication skills, biblical skills, language skills, cross-cultural skills, consultancy skills, and training skills.

0. Introduction

This paper is very personal. I share from my experience as a translation consultant and mentor since 1986 when the Jula team in Côte d'Ivoire, of which I was a member for 12 years, started the translation of the New Testament.

Throughout the production of the Jula New Testament translation, which was published in 1993, I was one of the two exegetical advisors on the team. We trained the African translators in exegetical and translation principles and learned from them and were mentored by them about their language and culture and actual translation into their language. We took workshops together and our translation was checked by a number of consultants from whom we learned and by whom we were mentored. Towards the end of our translation I was encouraged by our administration to pursue the consultant route. I attended workshops (exegetical ones and one on interpersonal skills). Soon I was allowed to check a number of translations in Côte d'Ivoire, run workshops and pursue further academic training which ultimately resulted in a Ph.D. in Intercultural Studies (with a concentration on Bible translation and Islam) from Fuller Theological Seminary, School of World Mission in 1995.

After the NT in Jula was finished, I moved to the neighboring country of Mali to help Malian teams as a consultant because they had none. My ministry continued also with Ivorian teams, and widened to include teams from other French-speaking countries like Senegal, Guinea-Conakry, Burkina-Faso, Niger, Bénin and Chad. Since 1999 I have been international translation consultant.

1. Mentoring as empowering

Let me start with a quote from Paul D. Stanley and J. Robert Clinton's book "Connecting. The Mentoring Relationships you Need to Succeed in Life" (1993: 33):

"Mentoring is a relational experience in which one person empowers another by sharing God-given resources."

This statement summarizes my philosophy of mentoring. I discovered early on that I like to mentor gifted translators and exegetes to become translation consultants. I was also encouraged to continue to do so because of the increasing need for consultants in the light of Vision 2025 for which the more rapid development of translation consultants has become a high priority (John Watters, 2004). Over the years I have mentored eighteen consultant-trainees. Here are some statistics which will illustrate the challenges of being an international translation consultant and entity consultant myself while being mentor and trainer of consultants-in-training in very diverse circumstances: I have mentored 8 consultants-in-training from SIL, 4 from other missions, 6 Africans and 11 from other countries than Mali where I am based, and 3 have been groomed out of a CARLA project to become consultants in the CARLA project and to be of service in other projects. Seven of my mentees have already become consultants, after having been recommended by me, 3 have Ph.D.'s, 7 M.A.'s (2 of them want to attain a Ph.D.), 2 B.A.'s (going for an M.A.), 2 have gone in other directions, and 3 are on hold.

How did I find my mentees? That happened in different ways. In checking translations in about 30 languages and about 25 additional languages in workshops which I ran (Genesis, Psalms, Mark, John, Romans, Galatians, Philippians, key terms workshops, consultant development workshop for checking Hebrew poetry), I enjoyed being a talent scout on the look-out for colleagues and African translators who have the potential of becoming translation consultants. At each of these workshops I gave those gifted individuals a chance to present an exegesis and to check a translation under supervision. At consultant training workshops usually the trainees are encouraged to look for a possible mentor among those consultants present. Some of my mentees come from such a workshop, but usually they are those whom I knew before those workshops and who knew me. In a few cases I was approached by individuals who wanted to be mentored by me with whom I had never worked but who had observed me at checking sessions or had read my publications.

The question is how mentoring works at a distance with consultants-in-training coming from 11 different countries. I can say it works if those countries are neighboring countries. For different needs, mentor and mentee negotiate schedules. They discuss how realistic and beneficial it is to meet face to face. They agree at what occasions it is necessary to meet personally, like at workshops and/or checking sessions, or conferences. In the electronic age the mentor is quickly available and open to many questions which can be addressed timely by e-mail or Skype, such as: book recommendations, information about upcoming conferences, encouragement with study programs, help and guidance with publications.

My mentees have very different backgrounds. Some have excellent or good knowledge of original languages but little field experience in translation. Some have a lot of translation experience but not much academic training. A few have Ph.D.'s in translation-related disciplines (linguistics), and some are in the process of improving their academic credentials. What all have in common is that they are mid-career people who need tailor-made consultant development plans. So everybody is treated in an individualized way. With each one I started with a growth plan for translation consultants which is regularly revised and updated. These professional growth plans for translation consultants, developed by SIL, are a good model to follow in order to monitor and guide the mentee in his/her professional development. In a positive sense, there is mutual agreement that the mentor will hold the mentee accountable. These growth plans allow to see what a candidate has already achieved and in what areas he or she needs to grow, such as: interpersonal skills, translation skills, biblical skills, language skills, cross-cultural skills, consultancy skills and training skills. Means for achieving these competencies differ from person to person depending on where the person is when identified as a potential/trainee consultant. I will give examples from my experience in all these areas following a slightly modified outline of AFA Translation Consultant Development Guidelines (2007).

1.1. Interpersonal skills

All the consultants in our branch, including myself, provide opportunities for mentees to watch experienced consultants (ourselves or other consultants). It is helpful for the trainee to observe the mentor in the process of consulting with others (consultant modeling). Here the mentee can observe how the mentor is sensitive to different situations, deals with different viewpoints, is able to listen and also to give appropriate advice.

We encourage all trainee consultants to participate in an interpersonal skills workshop. We suggest reading resources on the subject. I usually recommend to start with something simple but fundamental like Standley Lindquist, *Reach Out – Be an Encourager* (1983). This introduces the trainees to the important function and attitude of a consultant as an encourager. Encouragement includes “soft skills” (diplomacy, tact) but also “hard skills” (loving correction, constructive criticism) (see also Wedekind, “The Consultant as Counselor,” 1988). A number of my mentees have expressed the desire to learn about confronting, especially in a culturally appropriate way. I usually refer them to David Augsburg’s “Caring enough to confront” (1981) for a starter. At a more advanced level I recommend the reading of the section on “Interpersonal consultant skills” in Katharine Barnwell’s “A Handbook for Translation Consultants” (2003) and of Gerard Egan’s “The Skilled Helper. A Systematic Approach to Effective Helping” (1986). Of

course, the mentees need to be given opportunities to practice these skills in translation-related situations.

1.2. Translation and communication skills

In the French-speaking Côte d'Ivoire/Mali branch to which I belong we provide training in translation principles, using Katharine Barnwell's "Manuel de traduction biblique" (1990). Mentees with substantial translation experience are given opportunities for teaching translation principles courses and co-teach at translation workshops. A prospective translation consultant needs to be a good teacher and able to communicate effectively, both in writing and speaking. I never conduct a workshop where I do not invite at least two consultants-in-training to help me teach and check translations. At a "Psalms" workshop where 10 teams participated and to which I invited 7 of my consultants-in-training to help me, I gave 3 of them the opportunity to co-teach with me, and all of them the opportunity to check translations. Soon after the workshop I could recommend the appointment of 2 of those mentees to be acknowledged as consultants, especially as those having the competence to check the translation of Hebrew poetry.

After that workshop I also encouraged two of my co-teachers to submit for publication one or two of the exegeses of the Psalms they presented. I pointed them to outlets and recommended their articles to the publishers, and they have received positive feedback so far. I consider that help and guidance with publications as an important task for mentors. They have more publication experience than the mentees. They may see what is worthy of being published and encourage trainees to conduct research in a given area, provide guidance in that research, help them to write up their findings, provide fresh ideas and constructive criticism to improve the article to make it ready to be submitted for publication. Mentees usually ask for advice from their mentors in this area, and it has always been my pleasure to help them to get an article published.

As a mentor of translation consultants-in-training I also refer my mentees to articles I have written on translation-related subjects (mainly in the area of biblical key terms). In that way I multiply my skills. I am also mentoring some of my trainees to work eventually with special audiences. Some of them are already involved in such projects and some are preparing for such a ministry. For this purpose I have presented papers at a number of conferences for special audiences, wrote my dissertation and published articles to which I refer my mentees to speed up their training.

1.3. Biblical skills

I encouraged a number of my mentees to improve their knowledge in Biblical languages which they did at institutions in Africa (like FATEAC in Abidjan or NEGST in Nairobi) or at Western seminaries or Bible colleges, or in Jerusalem. One of them who intends to specialize in the Old Testament plans to attain an M.A. in Hebrew in Jerusalem where he has already received intermediate Hebrew training. I recommended to four of my mentees that they participate at a recent consultant training workshop in Ouagadougou, at which they received very useful training in exegetical skills, just to name one benefit of this training. Two of my mentees who received basic training in Hebrew in Africa want to study in Jerusalem to improve their knowledge of the language and cultures of the Bible in the country of the Bible. As I myself have completed this training, I could recommend it warmly to them. Thus a mentor is in a good position to encourage a mentee with potential for graduate study to follow such a study program, provide information, open doors and act as a sounding board/counselor to the mentee throughout the program.

I myself graduated from Fuller School of World Missions. Quite naturally it was not hard for me to convince colleagues to go for advanced degrees at the same institution which enabled them to become more effective consultants on the field.

With all of my mentees I recommend they subscribe to Bible translation discussion lists which someone has called an "online University on Bible translation." Quite a number have become members and are active participants in the discussions on a wide variety of subjects pertaining to Bible translation.

1.4. Language skills

We expect our consultant-trainees to be able to communicate fluently in the national language (usually one of the colonial languages) used for checking and training in the area/s in which they will be working. I have recommended that some of my mentees work on either their French or English in general, or on their manner of public speaking in particular. They gladly accepted my advice which will make them better communicators.

We also require experience in a translation project which presupposes analyzing and learning one local language. That also applies to so-called “fast-track” consultants (see Grebe 2000) for whom an effective internship track in an already existing project is provided. I had two consultants-in-training who balked at the requirement of analyzing and learning a local language. I remained adamant. One, a very scholarly type, saw the point and did learn the language. He has now been promoted to become a consultant. He did not regret the experience which allowed him to get linguistic training to analyze an African language and to see the cross-cultural side of translation which enables him to become a more effective, well-rounded consultant, and not just an exegetical advisor.

1.5. Cross-cultural skills

Learning a local language includes learning about the local culture. That experience makes a consultant-in-training not only linguistically but also anthropologically sensitive. In our Côte d'Ivoire/Mali branch we expect our teams to write five anthropology papers before they are cleared to begin translation. As translation coordinator and consultant I usually recommend to teams to write a paper on values, an area where they quickly learn experientially about cross-cultural differences anyway. I suggest they write a paper on a biblical key term (even if it is a workpaper) like “sin” with which they “kill two or more birds with one stone.” That is, they fulfill the anthropology requirement, they prepare themselves for the translation of the Bible in an area which is strategic (the “sin” problem and “salvation” as the answer to it), and enable themselves to become more sensitive communicators of the gospel.

On “biblical key terms” which is my specialty, I have run a number of workshops for language clusters (Manding languages, Senufo languages, Fulfulde language phylum) or individual languages (Soninké, Bozo) or one-book workshops (key-terms in “John”). To these workshops I invited a number of my consultants-in-training early on in their projects when they still served as translators or exegetical advisors on their teams because decisions on key-terms are strategic and have missiological implications. I have also taught New Testament key terms in a formal setting to prospective Bible translators at the FATEAC seminary in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.

1.6. Consultancy and training skills

As I mentioned above, I never conduct a workshop without inviting at least two consultants-in-training to help as teaching assistants. They help me with presenting one or more exegeses of selected passages, with supervising and helping teams in the revision of their translations, and with checking their translations. This on-the-job training provides many hands-on opportunities for mentees to learn by observing and doing. They are given training in the use of resources (commentaries, exegetical tools and computer resources). They receive training in different consultant techniques by watching the workshop leader and other consultants. They do supervised translation checking with teams themselves.

One of the best training in consultancy skills I have found is to invite a mentee to watch me checking a whole book with a team. The consultant-in-training needs to prepare carefully himself or herself for such a training opportunity and to be willing to check a number of passages under my supervision. I never invite more than one trainee for such checking because, apart from the team, the invited consultant-in-training needs all my concentration and individual attention in this one-on-one mentoring.

At such an opportunity the trainee can observe the mentor as encourager using praise and constructive criticism, as trainer (in translation principles, use of resources, in exegesis, program organization), as problem solver and counselor who helps to find solutions to a wide range of problems (not just in exegesis and translation, but also with conflicts between team members and churches and missions

outside the actual translation team), and, of course, as checker of the translation team's work procedures and the translation itself in all aspects which contribute to ensure the acceptance and use of the final product.

The mentee can ask all his/her questions and receives individualized feedback and guidance when doing the checking himself/herself. Both at these checking sessions of a whole book and at workshops where the consultant-in-training is given opportunities to teach and check, the mentor can assess the latter's ability to teach and train himself/herself which is a very necessary skill for a prospective consultant. The mentor can then guide the mentee in these consultancy and training skills with encouragement and loving correction, and give further opportunities to grow in this area.

2. Conclusion

In summary, let me repeat the above-mentioned quote from Paul D. Stanley and J. Robert Clinton's book "Connecting. The Mentoring Relationships you Need to Succeed in Life":

"Mentoring is a relational experience in which one person empowers another by sharing God-given resources" (Stanley/Clinton, p. 33).

A mentor is someone who empowers another person, be it as a helper, example, guide, coach, teacher, trainer, counselor, encourager, carer, checker or problem solver. I hope the report of my personal experience as a mentor of translation consultants-in-training has shown how this can happen.

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