

People who Train People

This regular column in the journal gives space to people who train people to do anything except TESOL!

Margaret Elderson, a personal assistant (PA) working in a Kent based company, trains young women to become secretaries. She uses a basic apprenticeship model, sometimes called the 'transmission model' or 'sitting with Nellie' (D. Britten, 1985). She received no preparation for her training role. The issues she raises during the conversation transcribed below echo the concerns of language trainers using the apprenticeship model although manages to touch on the issues with more humour and less jargon than is often the case!

TW: How long have you been a secretary?

ME: Oh, about 20 years. I always wanted to be one. At school I drifted along at the bottom of the class. The teachers were all elderly women. I was quite frightened of them. I suppose you could have called me 'thick'. But I loved the two-year personal assistant and secretarial course I did at technical college. We did a lot of maths. I mean practical maths, not silly maths. I loved decimalisation. I can work in tens. So it all seemed to click, really. I was top of the class there.

TW: And your first job?

ME: I worked for the Ministry of Defence. I'm not allowed to say what I did. The good thing about the Ministry was if you did well, they pushed you through different departments at tremendous speed. You may have started as a secretary but you soon went up. There were a lot of women bosses. The Ministry does their own training, with in-house courses and a lot of video. You can't help to run a ministry, but in a smaller company you have more opportunity to make a contribution. So my second job was with an electronics company. Part of my duties was to send foremen, management and executives abroad. I had to arrange accommodation, health documents, visas, everything. You know, working at senior secretarial level you are no longer just carrying out orders but are thinking for the boss-looking ahead, doing all you can to save them stress and time. Bosses loathe to call you a PA though, in case you get ideas above your station!

TW: Where are you working now?

ME: Well, I've been in my present job three years. It was the first job I interviewed for once I had decided to move on. It wasn't so much an interview really as a hilarious walk down memory lane as the interviewer and I discovered we had both worked for the same large company, although in different divisions. Fortunately, we still find we work well together. It was this boss who suggested I start training a YTS [Youth Training Scheme] girl.

TW: How did you feel about the idea?

ME: I thought it was the end of the world! I was so busy already, and you know you start with them sitting with you, and you teach them everything you know about the peculiarities of the company. It's very wearing because you have to do your own work and explain everything.

TW: How many have you trained so far?

ME: Well, we've had eight girls altogether on work-experience schemes, but not straight after each other. We take school leavers with no qualifications so we have to select on personality. They work with us three days a week and go to college for two days a week. At first when I told a colleague we were going to take on a YTS girl, she said, "Take my advice. Don't!" But then I thought it would be a challenge. And I thought, "I'm going to make it work."

TW: Had you had any training yourself for that new responsibility?

ME: Oh no. I would have liked to have been trained for the interviews. I've had to pick up interview skills via the office magazines that flutter through the letterbox. You know, sitting side by side not

across a desk from each other, ask them how they got to the office to calm them down and ease them into the interview. It's very hard work interviewing these young ones. They don't bounce back. You have to wait for them, smile, and so on, and slowly it starts to work. The young girl we've got now is so bright and so rewarding. She'd worked in all her school holidays so we knew she had get-up-and-go and was used to people. Luckily, my boss was away the first week she came so we had a few magical days and I could devote a fair amount of time to settling her in.

TW: How do you train her?

ME: It's very advantageous if you're there physically. Then I mustn't put a lot of work by her in a pile. I don't want to frighten her. So I sort out the work and give her maybe two things. Then I'll gradually build it up. Being confronted with piles of work is an awful pressure, even for experienced secretaries. So I act as a kind of gate-keeper for her until she can handle a near normal load. We no longer have a typing pool but there are experienced secretaries scattered around the building coping with their own work. I only get called in when there's a panic. I used to make the mistake of saying, "Oh, you poor soul. Let me help with all that." But then I'd end up with piles of their work and couldn't do my own. I have to resist that, so we try to go for a team feeling. Of course, I could delegate much of my own work away. But it's not my style. I like to keep my hand in. I don't give the YTS girl all the grotty jobs like making coffee or let everyone give her lots of things they don't want to do. I want to try and win her first.

TW: Is there any clash between what the YTS girl learns at college and with you?

ME: Yes. They are told different things at college. For example, in letter layout the college says "no commas". Well, I had to have a little think. I don't want to interfere with the college way so I explain the way the company does it and ask her how it feels. Sometimes we compromise. Sometimes she brings in a better way. I just hope they give her a decent course. She really deserves it.

TW: What do you do about correction?

ME: Well, it's their first job so you don't want to say, "You've done this wrong". You could say, "I used to make this mistake too". But that's not very good either. You try to get them to check themselves so that they spot their own mistakes. The present girl seems to like the idea. She feels she's taking responsibility. And then I let the college find the rest. There's a middle stage of course when she makes the mistake, then giggles, then corrects herself.

TW: What about professional distance?

ME: Well, you need a little bit of distance for confidentiality, but not so much. I'm a little less familiar with my boss now that we have the YTS girl. I call him 'Mr' now. He still calls me 'Margaret', whether visitors are there or not.

TW: What do you think of being a trainer?

ME: I think I must enjoy it, or I wouldn't keep going for the same sort of job. I mean I could just be a decorative secretary instead. I've been on PA courses but I've had no help whatever in being a trainer. I would go and get it if I needed it. But I'm very independent. I know where I'm going. I spent a lot of time with my dad when I was a kind. He was very practical and let me have my head. I follow the same pattern with my own trainees really. He's a very patient man, and very loving. But you know, it's funny. There are so many youngsters with typing qualifications and so on, but we have some people with no qualifications at all, and they are fantastic. So you can't always tell. You have to go an awful lot on feeling. One girl even trained herself in typing and she was great.

TW: Will you stay a trainer do you think?

ME: I don't know. I've got a nagging whether to do something new or just keep on. I'd quite like to start a company.

Reference:

Britten, D. (1985) 'Teacher training in ELT' in Language Teaching. CUP.

PS: Some months after this interview Margaret rang to tell me that the YTS 16-year old referred to in the article was going to stay on permanently with the company. "Not an ending exactly, but happy anyway", she said.