How Instructional Scaffolding Can Be Used in Faculty Grant Development

By: Bethany Lisi
Assistant Director of Foundation and Government Relations
Hampshire College, Amherst, MA

Abstract

One common barrier to faculty grant development at institutions of higher education is some faculty lack the self-efficacy to complete the task. When faculty members do not believe that success is achievable, most often due to a weakness in writing ability or lack of time management, a strong reliance lands upon the institution's assigned grant professional—the person responsible for reviewing and submitting proposals. This transfer of responsibilities frequently results in the grant professional's writing and editing the proposal on behalf of the faculty member. Implementing an instructional scaffolding approach, a technique used by teachers in K-12 education, assists the grant professional in encouraging faculty to take ownership of the proposal development process. Scaffolds are supports such as templates, coaching, or feedback put in place to facilitate an individual's mastery of new concepts or tasks. Scaffolds vanish, once an individual understands the task and develops the self-efficacy to take on the challenge independently. This strategy paper explores two scaffolds, checklists and graphic organizers, which aid grant professionals in training faculty and other grant seekers on how to develop competitive grant proposals.

Introduction

One primary responsibility of grant professionals at institutions of higher education is assisting faculty in the development of compelling proposals that are competitive for funding. It is important to note a misunderstood fact: a college grant professional is not usually a grant proposal writer. Typically, this individual is responsible for the pre-award activities that take place prior to the actual writing process (i.e. identifying possible funders, providing and reviewing guidelines) and subsequent tasks that come with proposal writing (i.e. reviewing the budget, ensuring college policies are accurately addressed, confirming the proposal meets the funder's guidelines).

Tight deadlines, faculty who do not consider themselves strong writers, and multi-component proposal requirements often result in the grant professional's playing a leading—not supporting—role in the proposal development process. Typically, faculty will depend on others (e.g., grants staff, external reviewers) to identify and solve problems in the composition instead of taking the time to read the text, evolve arguments, and make adjustments well before the grant deadline. Often, a grant professional "solves problems" by substantive editing. Direct editing, however, does not help a faculty member on the next grant proposal or build self-efficacy in grant seeking. Instead, by being too supportive, the grant professional enables faculty to depend on another person in the pre-award process, rather than helping them to take individual ownership and master proposal development.

Educators, English teachers in particular, have a similar problem when working with students. Teachers must avoid giving "after-the-fact" responses to writing, especially comments on papers that are never read by students. Donald Murray (1982) once wrote purposely bad advice on composition papers, instructing students to "be general and abstract" and "do this backward" (p. 158). Not one of Murray's students questioned the feedback after the papers were distributed, because not one of the students read the comments. How does an educator, or a grant professional, strike a balance between guided practice (working with a learner on a new skill) and independent mastery?

Using a Scaffolding Approach

Constructivism, an educational approach first used by John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, and Jean Piaget features hands-on, task-based learning. With the support of teachers and peers, a student learns new material and constructs an individual understanding of the topic. Instructional scaffolding is one constructivist method a teacher may use to support a student's mastery of a concept. Using this approach, a teacher provides structured guidance (a scaffold) that allows a student to reach a higher level of understanding. The scaffold is eventually removed so that the student is able to work at this higher level independently (Winstone & Millward, 2012). Scaffolding removes the option for the teacher to instantly solve the problem for the student.

In the case of grants, scaffolds remove the option for the grant professional to write and edit a proposal on behalf of a faculty member, as the faculty member must master the topic on his/her own. However, copyediting or proofreading may continue to fall under the purview of the grant professional. Scaffolds vary depending on the content, but typical supports teachers use include concrete materials like guides and templates, or actions like coaching and modeling how to accomplish a task. This strategy paper explores the use of two scaffolds, checklists and graphic organizers, to develop an advanced level of comfort for pre-award activities by college faculty.

Checklists

Checklists are a common tool in the K-12 classroom, as teachers use this scaffold to serve as memory aids. Developed for a single student, based on individual needs, or for

an entire class, checklists catalog the components that should be included in a project (Strickland & Strickland, 2000). The end goal, of course, is for the student to no longer use the checklist to ensure all of the pivotal components are covered, since the student has now mastered the task.

Nancy Atwell (1998) uses checklists with middle school students during peer conferences that contain guiding questions on purpose, information, and conclusions. A similar checklist should be created and distributed to faculty members for use during proposal development. The checklist, which can be in the form of broad questions, covers the basic components of a proposal. It serves as an intervention for the writing process, saving the grant professional time and energy during the proofreading stage. Sample checklist questions may focus on:

- the direction of the introduction;
- whether the proposal addresses the "So what?" question;
- if the proposal provides enough information to an uninformed reviewer;
- and whether there are redundancies.

Depending on time and return on investment, a grant professional can make specific faculty checklists for particular grant opportunities, based on demand from faculty members or administrators. For example, if faculty members are consistently applying for National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Fellowships, a sample writing checklist might include the following questions, based on the NEH program guidelines:

- Is the intellectual significance of the project described?
- Are the basic ideas, problems, or questions examined by the study explained?
- Is each stage of the project clearly described and what outcomes will be accomplished?
- Are the location of the project and the needed research materials identified?
- Is the intended audience of the project described?
- Are the intended results of the project described?
- How will the results be disseminated? Is there broad access?

Graphic Organizers

Graphic organizers help a learner shape concepts through spatial arrangements and allow for flexible application (Lee & Tan, 2010). Common forms of graphic organizers include fishbones, matrices, flowcharts, and concept maps. A sample flowchart the Hampshire College Grants Office provides faculty for the pre-award process is available at http://www.hampshire.edu/PreAward_Infographic.pdf (Lisi, 2013). In K-12 instruction, teachers use specific organizers for particular content areas. For example, a flowchart organizes the causes and effects of chemical reactions, while a concept map assists in brainstorming ideas and related connections.

For some faculty, particularly visual learners, mind maps serve as a resource to organize and outline information for a proposal. This tool is an asset during the early development stages of the project or program design. At the center of the map is the faculty member's project. Branching off from this idea are the goals, objectives, population served, outcomes, and impact. Certain goals connect with particular objectives, specific populations, and a single outcome—connections often absent in proposal narratives. Through this brainstorming activity, a faculty member develops a better sense of how to tell the story in the proposal. Drawing maps on a piece of paper or using sticky notes are options, but many online mind map applications are available free or for a reasonable fee. Encouraging the use graphic organizers during the prewriting stage of proposal development helps faculty members organize thoughts and ideas independent of the grant professional.

Using the Right Scaffolds for a Specific Environment

These scaffolds serve as just two examples of supports a grant professional can provide to faculty members and other grant seekers. Every person at one time or another struggles with writing; and specific scaffolds help individuals based on particular challenges. Other scaffolds include peer conferencing on the narrative, providing examples of successful grant narratives, and modeling how to outline the proposal. Every learner is different and every grants office and grants staff is different. Therefore, it is important to choose scaffolds that fit the individual needs of the faculty and grants staff, keeping in mind that writers are vulnerable. Scaffolding comes from a place of support—not condescension—allowing writers, both novice and veteran, to develop self-efficacy and find methods to create successful proposals.

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Biographical Information

Bethany Lisi serves as the Assistant Director of Foundation and Government Relations at Hampshire College, a liberal arts college in Amherst, Massachusetts. Bethany holds a Master's of Arts in Education and a license to teach Secondary English in Massachusetts. She is a doctoral student in the Educational Policy and Leadership program, specializing in Higher Education, at UMass Amherst. Contact Bethany at blisi@hampshire.edu .