Staying on the Cutting Edge by Involving University-Based Consultants

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The company is driven by research, led for over two decades by founders who are both speech-language pathologists. Mary Sweig Wilson, Laureate’s CEO, has more than 30 years of clinical experience as well as ongoing scholarship in linguistic theory. Bernard Fox, the company’s Vice President, has broad clinical experience as well as expertise in computer technology and educational software design.

The two met at the University of Vermont—Fox was Wilson’s graduate student. In 1980, they completed research which demonstrated that microcomputer-based language intervention programs could help people working with children with language disorders, and was a cost-effective way to deliver individualized instruction. Two years later, they founded Laureate.

Since that day, Laureate has produced over 60 software titles.

“We put lots of resources in research and development—half of our employees are in development,” says Mary Wilson. “We’re not getting rich, but unlike some other small companies, we’ve got the latest research in our programs, and we’ve developed several generations of software.” Laureate’s “next generation” of software for language intervention is currently being developed with the
assistance of grants awarded by the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD) totaling over 2 million dollars.

The most recent thinking gets embedded in Laureate’s products because Wilson and Fox are committed to making the best tools possible, and because they relish keeping up with the field.

One of several ways they support their continuous immersion in current thinking is through the services of outside consultants Jill de Villiers and Tom Roeper, researchers and teachers at neighboring schools in western Massachusetts, who collaborate on a range of research projects. de Villiers is a member of both the Psychology and Philosophy Departments at Smith College, and Roeper is with the Linguistics Department at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

“"I targeted them," says Mary Wilson. Close to nine years ago, de Villiers and Roeper were presenting at an American Speech and Hearing Association (ASHA) meeting. After the presentation, Wilson introduced herself and asked them if they’d consider critiquing some of the software Laureate was developing. “They were skeptical about how a commercial organization would work with them. But when they saw how committed we are to research as an organization, they warmed up.”

Jill de Villiers agrees. “Academics tend to be cloistered. Mary has a sophisticated understanding of linguistic theory and showed us a different way of looking it.”

The partners, de Villiers and Roeper travel north from Massachusetts to Laureate’s offices in Winooski, Vermont to review work in progress from Wilson and Fox, who are the authors of virtually all Laureate’s products (they use a few outside authors).

They consult on two or three projects at a time, critiquing Laureate scripts from a researcher’s perspective. They bring updates on trends in the field, and insights from new work they are exposed to at conferences or hear about from colleagues. And they see their ideas become products, tested, revised, tested again—and put in the hands of consumers.
Laureate clearly gains. What have been the benefits for consultant Jill de Villiers?

- **Meetings are dynamic, intellectual, and fun.** “She’s a great student!” de Villiers says of Mary Wilson. “She questions us continually. We can’t speak vaguely—she immediately challenges us: ‘What do you mean?’ And she wants practical solutions. It’s great for us intellectually, too.” For Wilson and Fox, the meetings are part of their intellectual growth—and keep them excited about the ideas and about incorporating those powerful ideas into better and better products.

- Respect is deep—and manifested tangibly. de Villiers and Roeper, at first, were somewhat taken aback by the idea that they would get paid for consulting. “Mary insisted,” says De Villiers. “Academics often do this kind of work gratis—it’s part of what we’re expected to do. Mary was very firm. ‘You need to get paid for this.’”

- Practical projects cast a practical filter when assessing new work in the field. Wilson asks de Villiers and Roeper to keep track of new work from conferences and meetings they attend. “It separates the wheat from the chaff,” says de Villiers. “We’re leaving a meeting, and we’ll talk about what we heard about, and we think about what we could bring back to Mary, and some of it just doesn’t seem as important because it hasn’t really got an application. It gives us another dimension to use in assessing value in the field.”

- It’s exciting to be part of something that really helps others. When businesses fail to reach out to colleges and universities, those researchers never get to see their ideas turned into products. By contrast, de Villiers and Roeper have seen their work put to use. They know that children and adults are acquiring important skills because of their expertise.

**Federal Tech Transfer Provides An ICAT-Inspired Expert System**

In 1992, Laureate Learning Systems signed a National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) Space Act Agreement with the Johnson Space Center on the Early Language Intervention System (ELIS) project. Under the terms of the agreement programmers and scientists from Johnson Space Center shared the design and concepts of their Intelligent Computer Aided Training (ICAT) system
with Laureate's development team. Laureate then sought funding from the National Institutes of Health to develop a series of programs using an ICAT inspired expert system.

With the support of a series of Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) grants from the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD) and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), Laureate has developed and published six Sterling Edition vocabulary, categorization, and simple sentence structure programs.

Cameos of Our Featured Collaborators

Mary Sweig Wilson, Ph.D. (CCC-SLP) is the President and CEO of Laureate Learning Systems. She received her Bachelor’s degree from Smith College, Master’s degree from Emerson College, and Doctorate in Communicative Disorders from Northwestern University. She is a Professor Emerita of Communication Sciences at the University of Vermont, where she taught and conducted research for 25 years, served as Director of the E.M. Luse Center for Communication Disorders for 10 years, Program Director of Speech Pathology and Audiology for 6 years, and Acting Chairperson of the newly formed Department from 1977-1980. She is a practicing speech-language pathologist with over 30 years of clinical experience in language intervention.

Dr. Wilson also has more than 25 years of clinical materials development and validation experience. The Wilson Initial Syntax Program (Wilson, 1972) was the first commercially available language intervention program to incorporate Chomsky’s Aspects model of syntax (Chomsky, 1965). Most recently, Dr. Wilson received the 1996 TAM Leadership Award given for “exemplary vision and leadership in the application of technology and media for children, youth, and adults with disabilities.”

Jill de Villiers, Ph.D. teaches at Smith College, in both the Psychology and Philosophy Departments. She received her Ph.D. in Experimental Psychology from Harvard in 1974. Her primary research is on language acquisition in preschool children, with a focus on how they learn grammar.

Current research includes: work in Language and Theory of Mind with Tom Roeper and Peter de Villiers, researching how children learn about the language of mental events through verbs such as think, know, believe, want, and intend.