



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## DEVELOPING KEY JOB INTERVIEW SKILLS IN A VOICE AND DICTION COURSE

Communication skills are important to employers evaluating job candidates. Employers and human resources personnel view communication skills as among the *key* qualities they seek in qualified applicants; lamentably, employers' recurrent criticism of community college graduates relates to their lack of these valued skills. Because of the multifaceted nature of communication, this preparation necessarily includes written, oral, and nonverbal modes, and can involve verbal fluency and clarity; written and oral precision/succinctness; proficiency in and awareness of nonverbal standards; and written aptitude relative to standard grammatical and written conventions.

### Communication Skills for Professional Purposes

Communication skills may be addressed in courses that include voice and diction, as well as introductory and mid-level communications and English courses. I have developed activities for my voice and diction courses that allow students opportunities to learn and rehearse verbal and nonverbal communication skills for business/professional purposes, and improve their overall communication skills.

Weak communication skills may first present themselves during job interviews and impact a candidate's ultimate employment. Deficiencies possibly include vague and disorganized responses, excessive dysfluency or use of fillers (e.g., "you know"), in addition to malapropisms and neologisms (e.g., conversate). Lack of familiarity with the "jargon" of interviews, subsequent difficulty answering common interview questions (e.g., "Tell me about yourself."), as well as use of colloquial language, may contribute to a less-than-positive presentation.

### The Peer Mock Interview Activity

A job interview may be a student's first encounter with potential employers. In order to help prepare

them, I designed and refined a peer mock interview. The goal of this activity, in combination with prior lectures and assignments, is to use pragmatic, relevant activities to help students prepare for common job interview questions, develop awareness of and practice appropriate professional etiquette, and build overall confidence in interviewing skills.

### Introducing the Job Interview Sub-Unit

In preparation for the peer mock interviews, I offer several lectures on common interview questions, potential responses, interview etiquette, and suitable verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors. A reading assignment helps to reinforce these topics.

At the beginning of the semester, students are informed that they will participate in mock interviews after the mid-term examination. Assignment instructions accompany job interview lectures around the 10<sup>th</sup> week of the semester. Students are instructed to identify and scrutinize at least 20 questions from those reviewed in class, as well as from selected online professional resource websites; to choose 10 questions from the set and develop answers to each; to choose a minimum of eight open-ended questions that require development of cohesive responses; to type the responses (outside of class); and to practice (with a partner, if possible). Students are instructed to come to class the day of the activity, dressed appropriately, bringing two sheets of paper—one with their questions and answers (typed), and one with their questions only.

### The Activity

I collect the sheets with students' written questions/answers for the assignment and introduce the activity by assigning interview dyads. Dyads are assigned to create interviewer/interviewee pairs of students who have not typically interacted throughout the semester. Each student's role (as interviewer or interviewee) is specified as the dyads are assigned. Students are asked to identify their partner and arrange their desks at 180° angles to each other. I explain that they will be engaged in a single interview in which the interviewer will be using her/his prepared questions (not the interviewee's)



during the interaction. This instruction is often met with some trepidation as many students are already anxious about not having their written answers in front of them (e.g., some subvocally rehearse their responses). Students begin their interviews by shaking hands and introducing themselves.

As the first round of interviews proceed, the noise levels increase. However, despite the potential distractions, students tend to stay focused on their individual interviews. As they complete the initial interviews, students return to their original seats. A rubric is provided for each interviewer, who is asked to assign a score to the interviewee's performance, based on four criteria—preparedness/fluency of response; speech/language appropriateness; dress appropriateness; response contingency. Scores are based on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 as excellent and 5 as poor). Descriptions of possible performance at the endpoints (1-5) assist interviewers in making their score choices. In the meantime, interviewees are asked to self-evaluate and annotate comments regarding their overall performance, based on the same criteria, as well as consider their nonverbal behaviors.

New dyads are assigned for the second round of interviews. (Students are never re-assigned to the same partner.) Roles are identified; students identify partners and proceed with individual interviews. As they complete this round of interviews, students return to their original seats, and a rubric is provided for each new interviewer. Descriptions of excellent and poor performances are given again. Students then engage in assigning a score (1-5) to the interviewee's performance, based on the same four criteria. Interviewees engage in self-evaluation and annotate comments regarding their overall performance.

With interviews completed, discussion proceeds, and these questions are explored:

- What qualities of your interviewee's performance most impressed you?
- What improvements could you make on your *own* performance as an interviewee?
- What is your overall impression of the activity?

During the discussion, students often provide positive feedback on their interviewees' preparedness, succinctness, precision of responses, professional manner, eye contact, and dress. Occasionally, interviewers provide specific examples of answers that were particularly impressive.

When students are asked to engage in self-analysis, their comments often address sufficiency of preparation, response development, nonverbal behaviors, fillers, colloquial language, and dress.

Reactions to the activity are invariably positive and include comments regarding the useful pragmatic nature of the exercise and the benefit it provides relative to performance anxiety. Student comments at this point also address the importance of preparing for the activity, despite having no prior knowledge of the questions they would be asked.

As the semester proceeds, students often comment on the utility of the exercise relative to recent actual interview experiences. Students indicate that the exercise allowed them to develop answers, feel better prepared, and increase confidence in their ability to portray themselves positively.

### Reflection

Communication skills can be learned and enhanced. By providing students with opportunities to develop and practice their job interview skills, they discover that preparation and practice are important, that they acquire an awareness of professional etiquette, and that they develop confidence in their interviewing skills.

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