

Work in Progress: Using Mock Telephone Interviews with Alumni to Teach Job Search Communication

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Abstract - In this pilot project, engineering students in a technical communication course at Vanderbilt University paired with engineering alumni to participate in mock telephone interviews. The purpose of the project was to prepare engineers for job search communication, particularly interviewing techniques, and to establish a networking relationship with alumni. A total of 75 students and 33 alumni participated over two semesters. The project included an alumnus guest speaker, a training workshop in interview techniques, an interview chart assignment, the telephone interview with an assigned alumnus/alumna, and a memo summarizing the experience. Students and alumni completed questionnaires to assess the project. Both groups rated the project very highly and recommended continuing it in the next semester with a student rating of 4.7 and alumni rating of 4.9 on a 5-point scale. In their end-of-course, anonymous self-assessment of meeting course objectives, students rated their knowledge of interviewing techniques before the project as 2.1/5.0 and afterward as 4.4/5.0.

Index Terms - Alumni mentors, interviews, job search communication, mock telephone interviews, technical communication.

INTRODUCTION

Preparing engineering students for the workforce is an important goal for many engineering educators. The transition from school to work can be facilitated by methods for bringing the “real world” into the classroom, such as basing assignments on industry feedback [1], encouraging contact between students and professionals in the field [2]-[3], and setting up mentoring programs [4]-[6]. For the past few years, the Vanderbilt Engineering Alumni Council (EAC) has participated in my technical communication course (ES 210w) to help engineering students understand the variety of workforce communication tasks and to help them begin networking [3]. Alumni stated their desire to help students make the school-to-work transition and to establish a supportive relationship that could be continued throughout and beyond their college years. Recently a new project was designed to reach that goal and to enhance the course’s job search communication module already in place. Alumni volunteers participated for two semesters with technical communication students, mostly juniors and seniors with various engineering majors, to provide immediate application of interview skills training through mock telephone

interviews. This report describes this ongoing project. The report includes questionnaire results from students and alumni to assess the project’s success, and students’ self-assessment of meeting the course objective for the interview skills module.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

The project had several goals: to bridge the gap between school and work; to provide a mentoring and ongoing networking opportunity; to provide practice in interviewing techniques, especially in answering behavioral questions over the telephone; and to provide practice in memo writing.

For two semesters, 33 alumni from all over the United States conducted telephone interviews with 88 students. Each student and assigned alumnus decided beforehand the type of job or graduate school interview to simulate. The interviews were approximately 30 minutes with 15 to 20 minutes for the actual interview and 10 to 15 minutes for a critique.

The project had these components: an alumnus introducing the project; student tasks relating to the interview; a late semester opportunity to meet with some alumni (first semester: a workshop/reception; second semester: a drop-by during an Engineering Week function); students’ end-of-course questionnaire assessment and evaluation of course objectives; and the alumni’s assessment after two semesters.

The students completed the following tasks: participated in an interview workshop; made an interview chart, analyzing applicable experiences; e-mailed alumni to schedule the telephone appointments, to send resumes, and to decide on a simulated job or graduate school interview; participated in the interview and received feedback; and wrote a summary memo, the only graded project component.

The project had positive results with few negatives. Eighty-seven of 88 students participating completed both the telephone interview and an acceptable summary memo. Only two students, one per semester, had problems with scheduling interviews.

ASSESSMENT BY STUDENTS AND ALUMNI

Anecdotal feedback from students and alumni indicated that students appreciated the practical application of subject matter while everyone enjoyed the personal interaction. Both alumni and students assessed the project through questionnaires, evaluating statements with a rating of 1 to 5. They also wrote brief descriptions of what they liked about the assignment and suggestions for improvement.

Table 1 presents the students' ratings, showing that they considered the project to be helpful and recommended repeating it next semester. Their lowest ratings related to networking.

TABLE I
STUDENTS' ASSESSMENT OF THE PROJECT ON A SCALE OF 1 TO 5. N=75

Statement	Rating
1. Continue this project next semester.	4.7
2. This project was helpful.	4.5
3. I learned something useful or interesting about the interviewing process.	4.2
4. Through this project, I improved my interviewing skills.	4.2
5. The contact with alumni was beneficial and provided a good networking opportunity.	3.4
6. I plan to contact one or more of these alumni again.	2.6
7. I enjoyed participating in this project.	4.0
8. Alumni responded in a timely fashion.	4.3
9. Sufficient time was allotted for this assignment.	4.6
10. I met with one or more alumni in person.	2.3
11. My assigned alum and I have had additional communication for other reasons besides the interview and alumni campus event.	1.1
12. The networking workshop was helpful (semester 1) or should be offered (semester 2).	4.0
13. I did well in my interview (added for semester 2 only)	4.3

Additionally, in their end-of-semester, anonymous evaluations of meeting course objectives, students rated their expertise in effective interview techniques with a mean score of 2.1/5.0 before taking the course and 4.4/5.0 after completing the course.

Table II presents the alumni's evaluation of the project. With a top rating, 4.9, alumni concurred with students that a mentoring project should be repeated in ES 210w. Surprisingly, continuing the networking relationship did not receive a high rating by alumni.

TABLE II
ALUMNI'S ASSESSMENT OF THE PROJECT ON A SCALE OF 1 TO 5 N=18

Statement	Rating
1. A mock interview project should continue next semester.	4.9
2. This project was helpful for students.	4.7
3. I helped my interviewee(s).	4.3
4. Use the same assignment again. It worked well.	4.4
5. Use a different assignment.	1.9
6. The student contacted me in a manner that showed respect for my time.	4.3
7. The student/alumni phone contact was beneficial and provided students a good networking opportunity.	4.2
8. Sufficient time was allotted for the assignment and my response.	4.5
9. I have had additional communication with one or more of my assigned students about topics other than this project.	1.9

10. I will contact one or more of my assigned students again.	1.9
11. Continue to provide interview handouts as resources for alumni.	4.7
12. I met with one or more of my assigned students during the reception (semester 1).	2.2
13. The alumni/student networking reception on campus was helpful and/or a good idea.	4.1
14. Always include an opportunity for the two groups to meet, such as a reception or luncheon.	3.5
15. I enjoyed participating in this project.	4.7
16. I am willing to participate again.	4.9
17. My assigned interviewee(s) did well in the interview.	4.0

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PLANS

Alumni and student ratings indicate that the project was a success in both semesters and should be continued as part of the course. Students gained interviewing skill and confidence. Alumni and students valued the personal contact over the telephone. Future networking was not ranked highly by either group and, therefore, is not really a major benefit as alumni leaders had intended. The most important benefits seem to be the alumni-student interaction during the project, the practical experience in interviewing, and the advice about job search communication offered by alumni professionals.

Future plans include continuing the project, requiring thank-you notes as recommended by alumni, and continuing assessment by students and alumni.

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