Connecting Communication Theory to Interviewing Practice: Strategies for Instruction and Evaluation

Lauren Mackenzie

Abstract
In an effort to extend students’ knowledge of communication theory to a practice they will be faced with both during and beyond their college years, I developed the interview/cover letter/resume assignment. This assignment not only connects theory to practice, but it also connects students to faculty in a way that helps develop their written, verbal, and nonverbal communication skills. In this article, I begin by discussing several communication theories that work to assist students with the interviewing process; I continue by suggesting interviewing and resume resources that can be used in the college classroom by instructors of any discipline; and I conclude with an overview of the assignment which includes a sample evaluation tool and company research checklist.

Keywords
Interpersonal communication theory, interviewing skills, resume and cover letter writing, nonverbal communication

Introduction
It becomes more apparent to me with every semester I teach how consumed my students have become with finding employment after the completion of their college careers. Especially, in these times of economic uncertainty, I sense my students’ appreciation of anything I do in the classroom that could ease their transition into the working world. This is not always an easy task, however. Those of us who teach theory to undergraduates often find ourselves seeking out new and applicable ways of using class time to meaningfully engage our students in the material at hand. That being said, I have had exceptional student feedback regarding the interviewing assignment that I created for my Human Communication course. The report based on this particular course and assignment was developed during the Spring 2009 semester when I was teaching at Fitchburg State College in Massachusetts.

Recently, communication textbooks such as Real Communication (O’Hair & Wiemann, 2009), Applied Mass Communication Theory (Rosenberry & Vicker, 2009), In the Company of Others: An Introduction to Communication (Rothwell, 2010), and Interpersonal Communication: Relating to Others (Beebe

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et al., 2008) have included segments dedicated to helping students through the interviewing and resume writing process. This article and my accompanying assignment suggestions are designed to complement these readings and assist professors with the task of combining theory and practice in the college classroom.

The development of this assignment was my attempt to extend students’ knowledge of communication theory to a practice they will undoubtedly be faced with both during and beyond their college years. This assignment not only connects theory to practice, but it also connects students to faculty in a way that helps develop their written, verbal and nonverbal communication skills. In this article, I begin by discussing several communication theories that work to assist students with the interviewing process; I continue by suggesting interviewing and resume resources that can be used in the college classroom by instructors of any discipline; and I conclude the article with an overview of the assignment which includes a sample evaluation tool and company research checklist.

Using Communication Theory to Inform Interviewing Practice

How, then, can communication theory help to guide our students in their quest for improving their interviewing and resume writing skills? Although there are many areas within the diverse field of communication that could provide insight into this question, for the purpose of this class (Human Communication), I focused on interpersonal communication theories and concepts that students had already learned in my course. Specifically, I guided students in their thinking about interviews as conversations (i.e., Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), the concept of “nexting” (i.e., Stewart, 2006), as well as nonverbal cues and “thin slicing” (i.e., Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993). I will provide an explanation of how each was used to contribute to the overall assignment in the paragraphs to follow.

One of the over-arching themes of my interpersonal communication class draws from the words of Susan Scott in her book Fierce Conversations. Her statement that our work, our relationships, and our lives succeed or fail “one conversation at a time” (2002, p. 1) is central to the way I approach teaching communication in general and conversation analysis specifically. My students were able to see Scott’s writing come to life as I introduced the interview assignment and we began to discuss the idea of an interview as a conversation with a purpose.

In their book, Analyzing Social Settings, Lofland and Lofland (1984, p. 59) talk about the interview as a “guided conversation” in which the interviewer is soliciting information from the interviewee to determine whether or not the interviewee is a good candidate for the position and the interviewee is able to determine whether or not the position is a good fit for him/her based on the conversations within the interview. When students consider the interview as a sort of co-constructed conversation that everyone involved can get something out of, it can re-frame (thereby creating new and alternative understandings) the whole experience and help reduce nervousness about the process. Additionally, drawing from Fontana and Frey’s (2000, p. 663) suggestion, the interview can also be thought of as a “negotiated text” that goes more smoothly if both parties are prepared and contribute to the best of their abilities. Although the study of conversation sometimes comes as a surprise to students (they often tell me it is something too ordinary and common to study academically), this assignment provides a welcome opportunity for me to remind them that the most influential communication events of our lives are conversations (Shottter, 1993; Stewart, 2006). If they want to improve the quality of their lives, they must look seriously and specifically at the study of conversation. In the case of this course and assignment, I reiterate that the interview is a conversation and that if they want to improve
the quality of their lives (with a better job, for instance) then they must prepare for the job interview by working to improve the quality of their communication and conversations.

One of the most important aspects of communication and conversation, according to Stewart (2006) is a skill he calls “nexting.” He defines this term as “doing something helpful next, responding fruitfully to what’s just happened, taking an additional step in the communication process” (p. 31). This can be applied to the job interview process when students come to understand that no matter how bad things look (if they haven’t been happy with their previous responses to the interviewer’s questions thus far, for example), they always have the option of attempting a “next” step. It can be an empowering realization for students who have been dreading going on job interviews because they may have felt as though they had no control over the communication situation. Stewart maintains that no one person determines all the outcomes of a communication event, and that all parties collaborate to help the conversation reach its full potential. This idea draws from the work of Buber (whom we have discussed earlier in the semester) and the insight that it is through dialogue and conversation that we can improve our relationships and our lives. Once students begin to conceptualize the interview process as a conversation in which they play an active role, they will not be deterred by previous difficulties in the conversation, but instead will focus on the potential they have to make the interview a positive experience by taking the next step.

However, as most of us who have participated (on either side of the table) in the job interview are well aware, there is more to the job interview than verbal communication. The study of nonverbal communication and “thin slicing” (Ambady, 2000, p. 203) provides very useful suggestions for students preparing for the job interview. That is, we are able to make decisions and “size-up” (Stewart, 2006, p. 176) people within seconds of meeting them. Research over many decades has shown that people are able to form fairly accurate impressions of others from mere glimpses of their behavior (Goffman, 1979; Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992; Carrere & Gottman, 1999; Gladwell, 2005, Houser et al., 2007). “Thin slicing” in particular, is defined by Ambady as “a brief excerpt of expressive behavior sampled from the behavioral stream” (2000, p. 203). Students are often intrigued when I describe Ambady and Rosenthal's (1993) study titled “Half a Minute: Predicting Teacher Evaluations from Thin Slices of Nonverbal Behavior and Physical Attractiveness.” As the title suggests, the results of this study reveal that participants who were shown six-second video clips of a teaching performance rated that teacher almost the same as a student who had known that same teacher an entire semester. The findings of this study suggest “first that our consensual intuitive judgements might be unexpectedly accurate, and second, that we communicate – unwittingly – a great deal of information about ourselves” (p. 440). I then connect the findings from this study to the interview scenario. I suggest that students not only think seriously about what they wear and how they greet the interviewer (with direct eye contact, a firm handshake, and so on) in those first seconds of the meeting, but I also suggest that students use the results of this study to prepare a polished response to the commonly first-asked interview question: “So, tell me about yourself.” If this first question is answered in a creative and impressive way, it can lead to the all-important (according to Ambady et al., 1992, 1993, 2000) favorable first impression.

Preparing Your Students and Yourself for the Assignment

I found O’Hair and Weimann’s (2009, pp. 485-518) segment on interviewing in their textbook Real Communication to be extremely useful in terms of preparing students for the interviewing process. The text
provides a sample cover letter and resumes as well as tips on online resources to help prepare students for the job search. Their overview of the many forms and functions that interviews can take is thorough and makes for some interesting classroom discussion. In addition, after surveying several local college and university career center Web sites (i.e., Fitchburg State College, University of Massachusetts, Clark University) I found seven online resources to be particularly useful for guiding in-class discussions about resume and cover-letter writing and the interview process. They can be found in Table 1 below.

These Web sites will answer most questions any instructor would have regarding the job search and all that it entails. Even if you can’t devote the class time to review these websites, you could list them on your assignment sheet or ask students to review several of them after doing the assigned textbook reading and bring their questions to class. I found these Web sites to be very useful resources for helping me to prepare students to succeed in this assignment and, of course, in their job search.

In addition, O’Hair and Weismann (2009, p. 485-518) provide a list of some of the most commonly asked interview questions, which I will summarize here:

» What led you to choose your particular field? What do you like about it? What don’t you like about it?

» In which kinds of positions are you most interested? Summarize your qualifications for the position.

» Have you had summer employment or a volunteer position in this or a related field that you didn’t mention on your resume?

» What have you learned from previous work experience?

» What are the most important considerations for you in choosing a job?

» What kinds of courses have you taken that you think prepared you for this occupation?

» Why are you interviewing with our company?

» What do you see yourself doing five years from now? What are your long-range goals?

» What have you done that shows initiative and willingness to work?

» Do you have any hobbies or interests that are related to this career path or position?

» What would you say is your strongest attribute? What is your weakest point?

» Can you tell me about a time you worked through a difficult coworker situation?

» What can you contribute to our company that would make us want to hire you?

» Are there any questions you want to ask?

I incorporate these questions into the assignment by asking students to choose three of the fourteen questions listed above and to write a well thought-out and detailed response to each. On the day this assignment is due, each student is paired with another student from the class, and they simulate the interview experience by practicing their oral response to the three interview questions they have chosen. The partner who is doing the interviewing then fills out a peer evaluation form rating the interviewee’s responses, and the students switch roles. This enables students to practice their verbal, nonverbal, and active listening skills in class after they have submitted their written assignments (resume, cover letter and written responses to the three interview questions they have chosen), having had the opportunity to demonstrate a wide variety of communication skill sets that they have developed throughout the semester.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WEB SITE</th>
<th>WHAT IT OFFERS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.quincareers.com">www.quincareers.com</a></td>
<td>Career Tool-Kit (cover letters, resumes, networking, interviewing, salary negotiation, career tests, and quizzes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.gradprofiles.com">www.gradprofiles.com</a></td>
<td>This Web site features in-depth graduate and professional school profiles with information about degree requirements, facilities, research opportunities, expenses, and financial aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.salary.com">www.salary.com</a></td>
<td>Enables users to research salaries by job title and geographical location. Includes salary related articles and news. Many links to local and national job search pages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.jobhuntersbible.com">www.jobhuntersbible.com</a></td>
<td>Author of <em>What Color is Your Parachute?</em> created this internet guide which includes comprehensive and well-categorized web links to various job sites and other career topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.jobhunt.com">www.jobhunt.com</a></td>
<td>A meta-list of on-line job search resources and services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.jobweb.com">www.jobweb.com</a></td>
<td>Sponsored by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, this website is geared particularly toward recent graduates. Job Web offers career information, job postings, and employer information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.overseasjobs.com">www.overseasjobs.com</a></td>
<td>Information about international job hunting, immigration, and resumes</td>
</tr>
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*Table 1: On-line resources for job hunting, resume writing, and interviewing*
The Interviewing, Resume, and Cover Letter Assignment

This assignment has several components designed to familiarize students with the verbal and nonverbal aspects of the job search. On the day I distribute the one-page assignment sheet (see Appendix A), we also review the reading from O’Hair and Weismann (2009) on the different forms and functions of interviewing. The students are asked to use the templates provided in the reading to structure their resume and cover letter (but I am flexible, especially with our graphic design students, who often lean toward a more creative format) and they are asked to choose three interview questions from the list above to prepare verbally and in writing.

At this point, I have also begun to speak with faculty in the department to coordinate a day when at least three can attend my class and contribute to a roundtable discussion on suggestions for interviewing and resume/cover letter writing. Ideally, this discussion would also include any alumni whom you might invite to visit, as well as any practitioners (non-academic) in the field. Of course, this involves a bit of advance preparation and a positive relationship with former students who can speak in an informed way about their job search and what they learned in the process.

Once the day is set for their classroom visit, I ask them to think of some personal experiences and tips to share with the class. I organize the discussion with PowerPoint slides. After we’ve discussed the information on the slide, I ask the faculty to elaborate with personal examples, and I open the floor for student questions. Some sample titles of the slides on that class day are “Too Much Information” (this reminds students to keep their email addresses, voicemail greetings, and Facebook pages appropriate for employers who may contact them), “Repetition” (this suggests that students think of creative action verbs for their resumes and interview conversations), and “Nonverbal Communication” (this reiterates the importance of turning cell phones off, dressing for the jobs they want, and so on). I found this day of class to be the most enjoyable of the entire semester. Not only are students given valuable information on the job search from people who have been through many themselves (as both interviewer and interviewee), but the interaction between students and faculty was encouraging and respectful. In my experience, students were most vocal about many faculty members’ suggestions to have two things memorized before the day of the interview. First a “sound bite” that explains what a communication (or other) major entails and why they chose this major. Second, faculty suggested that students should memorize at least one question to ask the interviewer. All faculty that participated in my roundtable discussion agreed that when a potential employer asks, “So, do you have any questions for me?,” it is a must for students to demonstrate that they have put time and thought into this position and are genuinely curious about it. One suggested question that many students told me they would ask in future interviews is, “How is good work rewarded?” Overall, student feedback on this assignment and the discussions leading up to it reflected appreciation for these two particular questions which, many said, they otherwise never would have thought to prepare in advance.

The next class day is devoted to research on the target graduate school or company of the students’ choice. I put together a checklist for each (see Appendices B and C) and asked students to bring their laptops on this day so that they could use the class time to do research and add detail and depth to their cover letters and interview responses. This is also a good time for me to remind students that they should not be sending out 25 “generic” cover letters to various organizations after graduation. Each cover letter and resume should be tailored to a specific organization where they would like to work; students can do this by researching and including specific information in the
first paragraph of their cover letter that speaks to why they would be a good fit for this particular job.

As stated at the end of the previous section, on the day that the students submit the written portion of the assignment (one-page resume, one-page cover letter, and three pages of responses to the three interview questions they chose) they also participate in the interview process, working in pairs and filling out peer evaluation forms (see Appendix D) during and after their partners’ responses to the interview questions. I urge students to take this seriously, of course, and ask them to maintain eye contact and exchange firm handshakes as they introduce themselves to their partners at the start of each interview. Once all students have practiced being both the interviewer and interviewee, I suggest they ask their partners what their weakest response (of the three) was and then formulate a new response using feedback and suggestions made by their partner on the peer evaluation form. Once all students have completed this, I collect the forms and attach them to the written portion of the assignment.

The assignment in its entirety was the highlight of my semester and I continue to think about how I can improve it in the coming months for my future students. Although I realize that this in-class assignment is not a novel idea (in fact, most professors I know do whatever they can to allow time for discussion of the job search in some way, shape, or form), I hope that the checklists, evaluation templates, and assignment guidelines I have provided, combined with up-to-date websites will complement the work that is already being done by professors to help their students prepare for the job market. For those professors who do not currently include an assignment such as this in their courses, this article will serve as a pre-packaged, researched and tested example of how this process can be incorporated into the classroom. I think those who choose to implement an assignment such as this will agree that the connection of theory to practice, of students to faculty, and of one class to students’ overall post-college job search serves to highlight the relationships that, for many of us, make teaching and learning so meaningful.
Appendix A
Resume/Cover Letter Assignment

Professor _______
Due: ______

I. COVER LETTER (20 points)
Your next major graded assignment for Comm _ is due __. For this assignment, please research a “target” job or graduate school program that you would like to apply to after graduation. Then, using the sample format of the cover letter from your “Competent Interviewing” reading, write up a one-page cover letter indicating your interest in the job/graduate school. Your letter should include the following:
1. Why you are interested in the position (Do your research on this school/company and explain how you AND they will benefit by you being there)
2. What makes you qualified for the position (Mention your most relevant work/educational experience & explain why this job/school is a good fit)
3. Correct format and NO spelling or grammatical mistakes

II. RESUME (20 points)
Your resume can be formatted however you like (a sample resume can be found in the “Competent Interviewing” reading), but please adhere to these guidelines:
Your name & contact info should stand out at the top of the resume
Include at least the following information:
» Objective
» Education,
» Work experience
» Special skills/activities
» References
3. Keep it to one page (double sided with back page listing THREE references – personal, professional, academic), 12-pt font, 1-inch margins

III. INTERVIEW (10 points)
This portion of the assignment will be delivered in class on __. Please choose THREE sample interview questions (from pg. 512) that you will prepare to answer on __. Type out a one-page (single spaced) response to each question Type out the 3 questions on a piece of paper to give to your partner You will be assigned a partner in class who will interview you and write up an evaluation of your responses (you will do the same for your partner). Your written evaluation will be turned in to me at the end of class

IV. TOTAL POINTS
You will receive full credit if, and only if, you follow all the instructions listed above. You should hand in FIVE (single spaced) pages in addition to the peer evaluation on __. This assignment will be worth ___ out of a total ___ points for the course.
Appendix B
Company Research Checklist
COMM _____ Interview Assignment

1. Company name ________________________________________________________________

2. What are their products and/or services? _________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________________

3. When was it founded? What is the history of its founder? __________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________________

4. What is its mission statement? _________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________________

5. What is its organizational structure? Who is president or CEO? ___________________
   _____________________________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________________

6. Where are the locations of this company (main and branch)? _______________________
   _____________________________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________________

7. Does this company conduct informational interviews? Could you set up a meeting to talk to an employee about this company? _________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________________
### Appendix C
Graduate School Research Checklist
**COMM _____ Interview Assignment**

1. School name ________________________________________________________________

2. What are the required courses? How many classes are taken per semester? ______________
   ____________________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________

3. Who is the chair of the department to which you are applying? _______________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________

4. What is the cost of the program? Is there funding available? _________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________

5. What are the professors’ areas of expertise in this department? _______________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________

6. How long does it take students to graduate, on average? _____________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________

7. What are the average class sizes? What is the student/faculty ratio? _________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________

8. Is there an internship or thesis requirement? _________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________
Appendix D
Peer Interview Form

Your name ______________________________________
Interviewee’s name _______________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did she/he provide adequate answers to all questions? Note inadequate answers.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did he/she appear genuinely interested in the position?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did her/his answers reflect any research/preparation?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was he/she confident?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What 3 adjectives would you use to describe this candidate?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are your observations concerning her/his nonverbal communication?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you hire her/him? Why yes/no?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional observations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


