

Employment Interview Preparation: A Writing-to-Learn Approach

Katharine Hansen (E-mail: khansen@stetson.edu), Union Institute and University, and Randall S. Hansen, PhD, (E-mail: rhansen@stetson.edu), Stetson University

Abstract

Many career experts, including the authors, agree that job-seekers are better prepared and perform better in job interviews when they have written and rehearsed answers to common interview questions. Novice job-seekers, such as college students, often have little or no interviewing experience, and because of this inexperience, some college instructors assign various interviewing-related projects to students. This article suggests that many of the techniques used to aid students, such as mock interviews, are not only successful, but based on solid theory taken from a variety of fields. This article synthesizes the literature and describes one approach to enhancing our students' preparation for the job market.

Introduction

College instructors seeking to prepare their students for success in employment interviews use various methods, including, for example, mock interviews. In addition to mock interviews, the authors of this paper assigned their students to compose written responses to questions typically asked in job interviews.

Because this assignment – based on the authors' personal experience and anecdotal evidence from the college students they have taught – of written responses to interview questions frequently has seemed to enhance performance both in mock interviews and actual job interviews, the authors turned to two disparate areas of scholarly literature to understand why the technique was effective. After reviewing literature on various teaching and learning theories, we concluded that the phenomenon is closely related to a pedagogical theory that has received diminishing scholarly attention since the 1980s – Writing to Learn. The second area we reviewed was the literature on employment-interview preparation.

The authors speculate in this paper that a Writing-to-Learn approach to employment-interview preparation – that is, composing written responses to typically asked interview questions in advance of a job interview – may improve job-seekers' performance in the interview. The paper attempts to provide a rationale based on the literature for an assignment to college students requiring written composition of responses to typical job-interview questions. This preliminary exploration examines the literature on Writing-to-Learn theory, employment-interview preparation, and related areas, and then suggests future research that could test the effectiveness of a Writing-to-Learn approach to employment-interview preparation.

Background

This literature review examines employment-interview preparation techniques, especially those that entail writing exercises and preparing possible responses to interview questions. It then explores Writing-to-Learn theory, especially in relation to its possible application to employment-interviewing preparation. The review briefly looks at the concept of “rehearsal” as an approach that is both closely related to Writing to Learn and applicable to interview preparation. Finally, the authors explore possible connections between employment-interview preparation and Writing to Learn.

Eder and Harris (1999, p. 2) offer the following “generic” definition of the employment interview:

The employment interview is defined as an interviewer-applicant exchange of information in which the interviewer(s) inquire(s) into the applicant's (a) work-related knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs); (b)

motivations; (c) values; (d) reliability, with the overall staffing goals of attracting, selecting, and retaining a highly competent and productive workforce.

The employment interview, which according to Posthuma, Morgeson, and Campion, “continues to be one of the most popular selection and recruiting devices in organizations” (2002), and which is intended to “predict the future job success of applicants” (Dipboye & Gauglar, 1993, p. 136) is the subject of increasing research interest (Posthuma, Morgeson, & Campion, 2002); in fact, Gilmore, Stevens, Harrell-Cook, and Ferris (1999, p. 321) assert that the employment interview is “one of the most thoroughly researched topics in human resource management.”

Writing-to-Learn theory was born in the 1970s, had its heyday in the 1980s, but began to be supplanted by such variations as Writing Across the Curriculum, and Writing in the Disciplines in the 1990s. Thus, scholarly research into Writing to Learn tends to be concentrated in the 1980s and early 1990s. While little research is being conducted in the new millennium in the area of Writing to Learn, the movement espousing writing as a tool for learning still has its proponents (e.g., Peter Elbow).

Interview Preparation

Research by Perry and Goldberg (1998) suggests that interview preparation is important because their study showed that when recruiters were asked about college students they interviewed, interviewing skills surpassed the students’ background or experience in recruiter assessments of the likelihood that their companies would consider hiring a given student. We can then speculate that students who have better interview skills than others may have dedicated more effort to interview preparation than others.

Maurer, Solamon, Andrews, and Troxtel, (2001) describe a variety of employment-interview activities in which job applicants can participate to ready themselves for interviews, including reading books about interviewing, engaging in preparatory activities, and undergoing coaching, in which activities might include “modeling, behavioral rehearsal, role-playing, lecture, discussion, programmed materials, videotape, and verbal feedback.” Palmer, Campion, and Green (1999) note that a great deal of proprietary training information is extant on interviewing preparation but is not available to the public (p. 338).

Most scholarly research on employment-interview preparation has been limited to narrowly defined and limited populations (Palmer, Campion, and Green, 1999, p. 341). These authors also point out that a great portion of the scholarly research discusses improving various interview behaviors without empirically testing whether these improved behaviors result in successful interview outcomes. Outside of scholarly literature, numerous mass-market volumes on job-interviewing and general job-hunting offer advice on interview preparation. Palmer, Campion, and Green (1999) observe that numerous job-seekers rely on “how-to” books to prepare themselves for interviews, and they segment these publications into two groups (p. 344): (1) “Answer-driven” books that provide lists of typical interview questions with strategies for responding to the questions or outright suggested answers to the questions. The authors suggest that interviewees who use these books sometimes give responses in interviews that may be what the interviewer wants to hear but may not be authentic to the job-seeker. (2) “Preparation-driven” books that engage the job-seeker in self-assessments that result in more authentic interview responses that are more useful over the longer term than the answers found in the “answer-driven” books.

A search of the Internet reveals that there is even software to help with interview preparation. The software program Interview Questions & Answers (<http://www.job-interview-questions.com/>) makes the claim that “in two hours you’ll be able to answer even the toughest questions.”

Most mass-market authors (e.g., Medley, 1993, Martin, 2004) agree that few interviewees prepare adequately for interviews. Barone and Switzer (1995, p. 213) go so far as to note that, while college students spend in excess of 4,000 hours studying and attending class to prepare for their career, the average interviewee spends less than an hour preparing for a job interview. Authors of mass-market books also agree on the reason for the lack of preparation – job-seekers have no idea what questions will be asked in interviews, so they assume there is no way to prepare. Finally, mass-market authors agree that this typical job-seeker rationale for lack of preparation is faulty because interview questions – or at least general areas of interview questions – actually *can* be predicted to some degree, and lists of frequently asked interview questions are available in any number of books, articles, and on numerous Web

sites. Richard Bolles, author of job-hunting perennial bestseller, *What Color is Your Parachute?*, in fact, asserts that all interview questions spin off from just five basic areas of inquiry.

Agreeing that it is impossible to predict exactly what questions a given interviewer will ask of a job-seeker, Carole Martin (2004, p. 121) nevertheless notes that “the secret to success in any interview is preparation.” Barone and Switzer agree that “preparation is essential in order to interview effectively” (1995, p. 213). Washington (1995) points out that since so few job-seekers prepare for interviews, those who do will “gain a real edge over others through preparation” (p. 109).

Numerous authors, both scholarly and mass-market (e.g., Levine, n.d.; Barone & Switzer, 1995), suggest that job-seekers review lists of typical questions to gain an idea of what types of information the interviewer likely seeks. Barone and Switzer further suggest that would-be interviewees “organize their thoughts about what information it is important to share” (1995, p. 224). Rather than advising preparation of specific responses to these questions, the authors recommend that the candidate “consider possible answers to possible questions.” Washington (1995, p. 7) advises the job-seeker to “jot down” the points he or she wishes to make in response to typical questions but not to “develop word-for-word responses.” Similarly, Barbour et al (1995, p. 55) suggest developing a list of what characteristics might be needed for success in the position for which the job-seeker is interviewing.

The mass-market authors are virtually unanimous in their view that responses to interview questions should not be memorized (e.g., Martin, 2004; Bolles, 2002; Crosby, 2000; Washington, 1995; Barbour et al, 1995) but should nonetheless be prepared – in some fashion – ahead of time.

Both the scholarly literature and mass-market work contain examples of advice that prospective interviewees should engage in writing exercises in preparation for job interviews. Among these is the recommendation of H. Anthony Medley (1993, p. 19), author of one of the earliest mass-market books devoted solely to interviewing, who suggests that the job-seeker prior to interviewing write an autobiography, which can provide insight into the candidate, as well as reveal areas that he or she may not wish to discuss with an interviewer. Crosby (2000) similarly suggests that candidates practice describing themselves, citing professional characteristics with examples from school and work experience.

Karl Smart (2004) describes a technique in which college students are assigned to write “detailed proof statements” (p. 202) about themselves. Equating these statements to “30-second commercials about themselves” (p. 202), Smart describes them as statements that provide specific examples that demonstrate that students possess the skills needed to perform jobs they would consider applying for. Smart suggests that polished “proof statements” can provide potent fodder for such typical interview questions as “Tell me about yourself” and “Tell me about one of your strengths” (p. 204).

Despite his admonitions not to write out interview responses word-for-word, Washington (1995) suggests as preparation for interviewing some detailed writing exercises – involving identifying about 30 accomplishments and writing 100-400 words on the top 12 of these, and then isolating skills demonstrated by each accomplishment (p. 198-202). Martin recommends that job candidates write “success stories” to prepare for interviews, particularly behavioral interviews (2004, p. 127).

In a study of home-economics teachers and their use of writing to assist student learning, Johnson, Holcombe, Simms, and Wilson (1993, p. 156) mention a teacher who assigned students to write in preparation for interviews. The emphasis in the assignment, however, seemed to be formulating questions that students would ask in interviews, rather than responses to questions they might be asked. In addition to the fact that the authors mention no outcomes of this assignment, they also do not make it clear that *employment* interviews are the type of interviews under discussion.

Some career experts who provide coaching in interview techniques encourage their clients to compose written responses to typical interview questions. Three of these experts described these writing approaches to the authors. The first is Freddie Cheek of Cheek & Cristantello Career Connections. Cheek is a certified resume writer who holds additional career credentials:

Clients ... come up with questions that they might be asked (and may be unsure how to answer), and they also write out answers to questions that I (and they) supply.

I especially want their answers to be in the CAR [Challenge-Action-Result] format with anecdotes or specific examples. We go over them together, and then they review all of these before actual interviews. Of course, I caution them against trying to memorize the answers. However, I find that the physical act of writing out their responses helps them later in formulating what to say.

My clients often state that after these exercises they are more confident and find few surprises during the interview. Many come out of an interview feeling they did a great job and that [feeling] is supported by the offers they receive.

This is especially effective with clients who are poor communicators, tend to be vague in their answers, usually get tongue-tied, or are very shy. This gives them an opportunity to answer questions without having to “think on their feet,” something most of my clients cannot do (Freddie Cheek, personal communication, Dec. 10, 2003).

The next career expert describing using writing in preparation for interviewing is Deborah Wile Dib, a nationally certified resume writer and career coach, as well as owner and president of Advantage Resumes:

The act of having clients write/organize their thoughts is very helpful.

When doing resume prep and interview coaching, I ask my clients to identify their five top business/leadership skills and then craft at least three CAR [Challenge-Action-Result]-based success studies to demonstrate each of those skills. This makes the intangible tangible. Through coaching, we hone them until they are solid “extemporaneous” stories. We also discuss any difficulties the interviewee anticipates and craft value-driven responses to those, as well.

With this prep, the client doesn't have to practice or memorize responses to many, many interview questions. They have at least 15 “stories” they can tell that are predictors of future success. The process of coaching/writing/coaching/practice works wonders, and clients always say how well prepared they feel. They end up interviewing by “doing the job” in the interview and ... move ahead in the process until they are among the finalists (Deborah Wile Dib, personal communication, Dec. 10, 2003).

A third career expert who promotes writing as preparation for job interviews is Barbaraanne Breithaupt, president and owner of BLI Consulting, which offers training for new resume writers, coaches, and businesses:

My technique revolves around the written answer. When my clients come to me, I have about 50 questions and answers that may or may not be asked in a typical interview. They are [listed on] a handout that every client gets.

At session 1, we read through them and decide for their profession which questions would be pertinent for them and cross the others out. Then I tell them that their homework is to prepare answers for the questions that are left for session 2. At session 2, I go over the answers with them and perfect [each] answer. We then interview back and forth with their answers. We do this for two more sessions. I tell my clients ... not to memorize an answer but rather to get the idea of the answer in their heads.

Does it work? Yes. My clients can whip the answer out to any question an employer gives them. In my view, if you hesitate for one second when you are asked a question, you are done. My clients do not. They know the answer at all times. They blow any employer away (Barbaraanne Breithaupt, personal communication, Dec. 10, 2003).

Another technique that prospective interviewees can learn in preparation for job interviews is “impression management.” Stevens and Kristof (1995) identify verbal statements among the behaviors that can enable a job interviewee to manage the impression he or she makes on the interviewer in employment interviews. Specifically, the authors point to content focusing on self-promotion, or positive statements to describe oneself, one's future

plans, or one's past accomplishments, as useful impression-management techniques. In elaborating on these tactics, Stevens and Kristof further describe "entitlements," or claims of responsibility for positive events, "enhancements," putting a more positive "spin" on an action than it initially seems to warrant, and descriptions of overcoming obstacles in the pursuit of goals. Later, in coding impression-management tactics for their research, the authors added personal stories to the list of impression-management techniques that interviewees use, defining these stories as "descriptions of specific past events or actions such as recounting the details of a study group's interaction or one's work experiences in a particular instance (in contrast to describing generally what one's responsibilities were)." Similarly, Ralston and Kirkwood (1999) note that impression management may be the "result of following a routine script" (p. 192).

Writing to Learn

James Britton, considered by many to be the father of the Writing-to-Learn movement, asserts that writing is learning because writing enables learners to organize their knowledge "and extend it in an organized way so that it remains coherent, unified, reliable..." (1983, p. 223).

If Britton is the father of Writing to Learn, Janet Emig is the movement's mother. In her frequently cited essay on writing as a mode of learning, Emig (1981) touts the themes of "higher cognitive functions, such as analysis and synthesis" associated with verbal language, especially written language (p. 69), which "involves the fullest possible functioning of the brain (p. 73). Building on theories by Bruner and Piaget, about the modes in which humans "represent and deal with actuality," Emig notes that "writing through its inherent re-inforcing cycle involving hand, eye, and brain marks a uniquely powerful multi-representational mode for learning" (p. 73).

The idea behind Writing to Learn is not for students to polish the mechanics of writing, but as Elbow (1994) writes, for them to "learn, understand, remember and figure out what [they] don't yet know." Fulwiler and Young (1982) offer this definition of Writing to Learn: In Writing to Learn, they write, "we write to ourselves as well as talk with others to objectify our perceptions of reality; the primary function of this 'expressive' language is not to communicate, but to order and represent experience to our own understanding. In this sense language provides us with a unique way of knowing and becomes a tool for discovering, for shaping meaning, and for reaching understanding" (p. x).

Numerous scholars (e.g., Johnson, Holcombe, Simms, & Wilson, 1993) support Emig's notions that writing empowers cognitive skills and thinking. "Writing is one of the most effective ways to develop thinking," writes Forsman (1985, p. 162). She notes that through using writing-to-learn strategies, she has enabled students to "organize the wealth" and "sort out and select the one gem they want to polish." Citing student evaluations of her writing classes, Forsman relates that students characterize what they've learned as a process of identifying additional questions and "clarifying what they think" (p. 174). "In other words," Forsman writes, "they are well on their way to becoming thinking learners." Writing has been called "thinking on paper" (Cherry, n.d.). In their comprehensive review of the Writing-to-Learn literature, Penrose and Sitko (1993) note writing's ability to engage the writer in higher-order thinking, such as analytical and reflective thinking.

Other scholars emphasize the involvement of the various aspects of physical self in Writing to Learn – Emig's "re-inforcing cycle involving hand, eye, and brain" (1983, p. 73). "It's a physical activity, unlike reading," writes Zinsser. "Writing requires us to operate some kind of mechanism – pencil, pen, typewriter, word processor – for getting our thoughts on paper" (1988, p. 49). Similarly, Reaves, Flowers, and Jewell (1993, p. 34) note that writing involves processing information "in a physical, tangible form." Joliffe asserts that this physical act of writing compels writers to become "actively involved" with what they're writing about (1995, p. 199). Through writing, Joliffe says, participants "generate challenging ideas ... engage in a substantial process ... practice analysis and synthesis ... and demonstrate a personal commitment to their ideas..." In sum, writing to learn is "an avenue toward rich ideation," Joliffe states (p. 200).

The learning of concepts and content is among the key benefits of writing as a way of learning (Maxwell, 1996, as quoted by Cherry, n.d.). With Writing to Learn projects, (Kiefer, LeCourt, Reid, & Wyrick, 1998), "students learned key concepts and understood material more fully while also practicing some features of discourse for the specified discourse community."

Writing to Learn enjoys support among scholars for its ability to imbue participants with communication skills (Writing Across the Curriculum in the College of Arts and Sciences, n.d.) and for “helping students mature as effective communicators” (Kiefer, LeCourt, Reid, & Wyrick, 1998). Knoblauch and Brannon (1983, p. 467) assert that writing promotes learning because “learning and articulating are inseparable activities.” Similarly, Mayher, Lester, and Pradl (1983) tout writing as “an important facilitator of learning anything that involves language” because of “writing’s capacity to place the learner at the center of her own learning.”

The literature (e.g., Penrose & Sitko, 1993; Eckhardt & Stewart, 1981; Zinsser, 1988) supports the power of writing to help clarify and organize concepts and thought. “People perceive and remember information, not as isolated bits but as sets, ‘structure,’ which are in some way applicable to their other personal concerns,” Eckhardt and Stewart write (1981, p. 101).

Some research suggests that writing may facilitate self-actualization, self-esteem, and even self-transformation. A teacher in the study by Johnson, Holcombe, Simms, and Wilson (1993, p. 157) expressed her belief that students got to “know themselves better by writing.” Zinsser (1988, p. 208) observes that “writing ... improves self-esteem because mentally processed ideas then belong to the writer...” Parker and Goodkin (1987) assert that through writing “we can come to know ourselves differently, and, thus to be different in the world. We can, for example, construct a new self in writing, which we may then enact experimentally in our lives” (p. 49).

Scholars point to Writing-to-Learn approaches as enabling writers to connect and integrate information (Penrose & Sitko, 1993), as well as assisting learning by facilitating reformulation and extension of ideas and experiences (Langer & Applebee, 1987, p. 136).

At least one study brings together numerous positive aspects of Writing to Learn. In research into college students taking writing-intensive classes in their majors at the University of Hawaii, Hilgers, Hussey, and Stitt-Bergh (1999, p. 333) learned that the students generally “understood writing in the disciplines as a communicative, frequently persuasive action.” The vast majority (91 percent) said that through the type of writing they had done in these writing-intensive classes, they learned about the topic or subject at hand (p. 342); in fact, nearly half (47 percent) believed that “overall, writing is the best way for them to learn.” They attributed to writing enhanced abilities to organize and refine concepts, as well as analyze and probe deeply and become more confident (p. 343). In the qualitative portion of their research, the authors found that some students felt that writing helped to bolster their speaking ability (p. 343).

Rehearsal

It may be useful within this exploration to consider the concept of “rehearsal” because of its close relationship with both Writing to Learn and common advice for employment-interview preparation. Boehm (n.d.), for example, notes that in Writing to Learn, “students can ‘rehearse’ ideas and strategies before tackling formal writing assignments; they can ‘practice’ before the ‘big game.’” Similarly Murray (1981) points out that “rehearsal is also a normal part of the writing process” (p. 172).

Rehearsal is frequently mentioned in advice about employment-interview preparation, particularly in support of rehearsal’s positive effect on the interviewee’s self-assurance. Crosby (2000) notes that interviewers themselves suggest that prospective interviewees rehearse interviews with a career counselor or friend “to gain confidence and poise.” Seitz and Cohen (1992) write that “through mental rehearsal, job seekers can practice interviews with a successful outcome until the unconscious mind believes it has already happened.” The anonymous article, “Winning the battle of the nerves” (2003), also notes the confidence-boosting effect of rehearsal: “... if you practice responses to interview questions you think you’ll be asked, you’ll feel more secure during the real interview.” Washington (1995, p. 7) similarly suggests that practicing responses will help the job-seeker feel “confident and relaxed.”

Barone and Switzer (1995, p. 224) recommend “practicing interview answers aloud,” a process that “provides the opportunity to actually hear how they sound” and as with writing, enables the interviewee to “adapt wording accordingly.” Barbour et al (1995) also suggest rehearsing, especially with someone who doesn’t know much about the position the job-seeker plans to interview for (p. 34-35). They also advise tape-recording the rehearsals, asking “would I hire myself” while listening to the recordings, and then refining and polishing substandard responses (p. 57).

In their study of the extent to which interview-preparation techniques impact interview performance, Maurer, Solamon, Andrews, and Troxtel (2001) used role-playing, a form of rehearsal, with their study participants, using five sample questions.

Rehearsal as a technique for successful interview preparation is the entire premise behind Gottesman's and Mauro's mass-market *The Interview Rehearsal Book* (1999), which also emphasizes writing as a form of rehearsal and a way to organize one's thoughts in advance of a job interview. "The simple act of getting some thoughts down on paper," the authors write (p. 4-5), "... will help you to think more clearly and specifically about what you have to offer potential employers." Gottesman and Mauro provide numerous writing exercises in the book and stress that simply thinking about the answers to these exercises is not sufficient; to remember good ideas, writing is highly recommended (p. 5). They advise practice in telling stories about, for example, accomplishments, but caution against memorization, which will result in the candidate's sounding "stilted and mechanical" (p. 31) in interviews. "Instead, ad-lib from your memory of what you've written," the authors recommend (p. 31). Research on memory (Guest & Murphy, 2000) has stressed the role of rehearsal and repetition.

While the type of mock/practice interviewing and rehearsal that Gottesman and Mauro tout can be helpful to interview preparation, Emig (1981) points out that "writing tends to be a more responsible and committed act than talking" (p. 72).

Linking Employment Interview Preparation with Writing to Learn

This review of the literature on Writing to Learn has looked at the capacity for writing to help individuals learn and remember concepts and content, improve thinking and cognitive abilities, organize their thoughts, enhance communication skills, bolster their self-image, and make connections – all skills that can be applied successfully to employment-interview preparation.

Within the scholarly literature about employment-interviewing preparation, the closest approximation of examining a Writing to Learn approach appears to be a study by Maurer, Solamon, Andrews, and Troxtel (2001) of the extent to which interview-preparation techniques impact interview performance. The authors determined that a preparation behavior that correlated with high-scoring interviews was "organization," in which participants described such activities as: "Used the pencil and paper provided to write notes before giving my answers," and "Organized my answers in a chronological, logical, and easy-to-follow manner." Demonstrating thoughtfulness and organized thinking was positively associated with interview performance, the authors assert.

Although this organization behavior took place during the interview itself and not beforehand, it is not too great a leap to extrapolate that the advantages of composing written responses to typical interview questions before an interview may be similar to the benefits of jotting down organizational notes during the interview. "By using the organization strategy, the interviewee can think carefully about all of the behaviors that he or she would engage in given a specific situation and then organize them in a manner that makes the most sense given the hypothetical scenario," write Maurer, Solamon, Andrews, and Troxtel (2001). "By outlining his or her thoughts before speaking, his or her answer can be of higher quality than if he or she just begins to freely spout thoughts and behaviors as they come to mind."

Whether note-taking occurs during the interview or before, Murray identifies the act as a starting point in a process that organizes thoughts: "For most writers, the informal notes turn into lists, outlines, titles, leads, ordered fragments, all sketches of what later may be written, devices to catch a possible order that exists in the chaos of the subject" (p. 173). These pre-writing and early-writing processes are captured in a term set forth by Mayher, Lester, and Pradl (1983) – "percolating" – which takes on particular meaning in relation to interview preparation with the authors' assertion that the writer uses his or her expertise about personal recollections and experiences (p. 38) in this stage.

A study by Huffcutt, Roth, and McDaniel (1996) of the link between interview impression management and cognitive ability suggests a role for the Writing-to-Learn approach. Noting that cognitive ability in applicants has been shown to be a "strong and consistent predictor of job performance," and, in fact, to predict job performance more "accurately and universally" than other constructs (largely because this ability indicates candidates' ability to rapidly learn job requirements), the authors posit that applicants with higher cognitive ability may exhibit greater

effectiveness than other candidates in responding to situational and abstract questions. (Similarly, Penrose and Sitko [1993] note that writing techniques are more effective with abstract than factual material). Given that the authors speculate that “more intelligent applicants may be better at thinking through such questions and giving more desirable responses,” it is reasonable to further conjecture that a Writing-to-Learn approach to job-interview preparation may supply a means for this “thinking through” process.

Also citing cognitive ability are Bretz, Rynes, and Gerhart (1993) whose research showed that this characteristic ranked sixth among employers as an indicator of the fit between applicant and organization (p. 317). Beyond “fit,” a large number of employers (94 percent) listed “articulateness” as a generally desired characteristic of interviewees, and 61 percent mentioned general communication skills (p. 321), traits that could be improved through a Writing-to-Learn approach to interview preparation.

Perry and Goldberg’s research (1998) is relevant to assertions that Writing-to-Learn improves communication skills and the ability to organize thoughts because their study included exploration of college students’ verbal skills in recruiters’ assessment of the factors that motivate them to consider hiring a given student. These verbal skills were characterized as the “ability to clearly convey personal goals, to present ideas in an organized manner, and to use appropriate grammar and vocabulary.” Perry and Goldberg also asked recruiters to evaluate students’ ability to relate their background to the position for which they were being interviewed. While there is no indication that the students in this study used writing techniques to hone these communication abilities, Writing-to-Learn’s claims to help its practitioners organize their thoughts and make connections suggests that the Writing-to-Learn approach would be one way to sharpen communicative abilities for interviewing.

Writing-to-Learn approaches also are said to help practitioners to make connections and links among concepts and ideas. Bretz, Rynes, and Gerhart observe that many “how-to” manuals for job interviewees recommend “practicing explanations of how previous experiences link to one another and to the desired positions...” (1993, p. 323). We can therefore extrapolate from Knoblauch and Brannon (1983) that writing may provide the means for job-seekers to make these suggested links: “Writing involves not only a search for connections,” the authors assert, “but a process of organizing those connections” (p. 468). The authors further note that “writing forces any mind to confront new experience, make connections with other experience, and discover some personal coherence” (p. 470). Langer and Applebee (1987) similarly support this notion of writing as a way to connect concepts, having found in their research that teachers observed this relationship between writing and making connections. Joliffe (1995, p. 199) refers to this process as integration of various perspectives.

Interview Assignments

Realizing that there is always an ongoing battle for classroom time, the mock-interview assignment can be done completely outside the classroom. And while the authors always scheduled and attended the mock interviews, there is no reason other faculty couldn’t work with their university’s career services office to conduct the mock interviews.

Here’s the process: This assignment is generally divided into two parts. In the first part, students are assigned a list of typical job-interview questions. In one author’s assignment, students are asked to write responses to a specific list of questions college students might expect in an interview, while in the other author’s assignment, students are given a much larger list and instructed to choose a selection of questions to answer.

Later in the semester, after inviting a human-resources professional from the community to serve as interviewer, the mock-interview schedule is developed, and students are instructed to sign-up for slots. These interviews are usually conducted over a period of three or four evenings in a two-week period. Only the guest professional asks questions during the interview, but both the professor and professional take notes and make comments about each interview. Each mock interview lasts about 10 minutes, and no more than 10 interviews are scheduled on any given evening.

In terms of grading, many options exist. These assignments could simply be a required aspect of the class, or they could be graded. If graded, the criteria can range from quality of the answers to professionalism displayed.

Two different ways of conducting and grading this assignment are posted on online course materials.

1. <http://www.stetson.edu/~rhansen/prinsyl.html>

Conclusion

We had observed that individuals, including our undergraduate students, who composed written responses to typical interview questions before interviews frequently performed especially well in interviews – but before undertaking the foregoing literature review, we did not have any scholarly basis on which to hypothesize the reasons for this phenomenon. We now posit that assigning college students to compose interview responses in writing can capitalize on Writing-to-Learn theory, thus helping students (and other job-seekers) learn and remember what they want to say in job interviews, improve their preparatory thinking, hone the cognitive abilities that interviewers often look for, organize their thoughts in relation to how they will respond to interview questions, enhance their ability to communicate those thoughts, bolster their pre-interview self-image (and perhaps their confidence), and make connections and linkages between the requirements of the positions for which they are interviewing and their experience, skills, and accomplishments.

We further assert that assigning students to write responses to interview questions – an approach closely related to rehearsal – aligns with employment-interview preparation practices suggested by both scholarly and mass-market literature.

Suggestions for supporting research

The most obvious research suggested by this preliminary exploration, of course, would be an empirical study comparing interview performance of subjects who have composed written responses to interview questions prior to an interview to the performance of subjects who have not similarly prepared written responses.

Other possible research questions include:

- Does writing interview responses before an interview boost the confidence of interviewees?
- To what extent does a Writing-to-Learn approach aid interview preparation for different types of interviews (e.g., situational, behavioral, structured, unstructured)? For example, Dipboye and Gaugler (1993) note that structured interviews, such as the situational interview “rely ... on the content of what is said” (p. 148), regarding interview behaviors as “extraneous.” Thus, in an interview in which content is seen as more important than behavior, might a Writing-to-Learn approach to preparation be more effective than for other types of interviews? And what differences might exist between performance in mock interviews and actual employment interviews?
- Does writing interview responses before an interview reduce interviewees’ communication apprehension? In their comprehensive review of interview research conducted between approximately 1992 and 2002, Posthuma, Morgeson, and Campion cite studies by Ayres and colleagues (Ayres, Ayres, & Sharp, 1993; Ayres & Crosby, 1995; Ayres, Keereetawee, Chen, & Edwards, 1998) in which students high in communication apprehension were considered relatively unsuitable for employment, were regarded as less effective communicators than other students, and were less likely to be offered a job (2002).
- To what extent does interview performance vary among different demographic groups following a Writing-to-Learn approach to interview preparation?
- To what extent does interview performance vary among individuals with different learning styles following a Writing-to-Learn approach to interview preparation? The Web site, Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetic Learning Styles (n.d.), notes that “visual learners have two sub-channels – linguistic and spatial. Learners who are visual linguistic like to learn through written language, such as reading and writing tasks. They remember what has been written down, even if they do not read it more than once. They like to write down directions and pay better attention to lectures if they watch them.”

References

- Ayres J., Ayres D. M., & Sharp, D. (1993). A progress report on the development of an instrument to measure communication apprehension in employment interviews. *Communication Research Reports*, 10, 87-94.
- Ayres, J., & Crosby, S. (1995). Two studies concerning the predictive validity of the personal report of communication apprehension in employment interviews. *Communication Research Reports*, 12, 145-151.
- Ayres, J., Keereetaweeep T., Chen P., & Edwards P. A. (1998). Communication apprehension and employment interviews. *Communication Education*, 47, 1-17.
- Barbour, K., Berg, F., Ennance, M., Greene, J. R., Hessig, M. J., Papworth, M., Radin, C., Renzy, E., & Suarez, J. (1991). *The quest: A guide to the job interview*. Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt
- Barone, J. T. & Switzer, J. Y. (1995). *Interviewing: Art and skill*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Boehm, D. (n.d.). Writing to Learn. Retrieved Oct. 9, 2004, from http://www.svsu.edu/~dboehm/writingtolearn.html#Benefits_and_Reasons
- Bolles, R. N. (2002). *What color is your parachute?* Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.
- Bretz, R., Rynes, S., and Gerhart, B. (1993). Recruiter perceptions of applicant fit: Implications for individual career preparation and job search behavior, *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 43, 310-327.
- Britton, J. (1983). Language and Learning Across the Curriculum. In *Fforum – Essays on theory and practice in the teaching of writing*, pp. 221-224, Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook.
- Cherry, S. (n.d.). Theory Talk: WAC and WTL, Swamp Fox Writing Project, Francis Marion University, Retrieved Oct. 9, 2004, from <http://acsweb.fmarion.edu/SCherry/swampfoxwp/wtltheory.htm>
- Crosby, O. (2000). Employment interviewing, *Occupational Outlook Quarterly*, 44(2). 14-18, 20.
- Dipboye, R. & Gaugler, B. B. (1993) Cognitive and behavioral processes on the selection interview. In N. Schmitt & W. Borman (Eds.), *Personnel selection in organizations*, (pp. 135-170). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Eder, R. W. & Harris, M. M. (1999). *The employment interview handbook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Elbow, P. (1994). Writing for learning – not just for demonstrating learning. University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1-4. Retrieved Oct. 9, 2004, from <http://www.ntlf.com/html/lib/bib/writing.htm>
- Emig, J. (1981). Writing as a mode of learning. In Tate, G., & Corbett, E., *The writing teacher's sourcebook*, pp. 69-79. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Forsman, S. 1985. Writing to Learn Means Learning to Think. In A. R. Gere, (Ed.), *Roots in the sawdust: Writing to learn across the disciplines* (pp. 162-174). Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Fulwiler, T., & Young, A. (1982). *Language connections: Writing and reading across the curriculum*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Gilmore, D. C., Stevens, C. K., Harrell-Cook, G., & Ferris, G. (1999). Impression management tactics. In Eder, R. W. & Harris, M. M. (Eds.), *The employment interview handbook* (pp. 321-336). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gottesman, D., & Mauro, B. (1999). *The interview rehearsal book*. New York: Berkley Books.
- Guest, K. E., & Murphy, D. S. (2000). In support of memory retention: a cooperative oral final exam. *Education*. 121(2), 350.

- Hilgers T. L., Hussey E. L., & Stitt-Bergh M. (1999, July). "As you're writing, you have these epiphanies": What college students say about writing and learning in their majors, *Written Communication*, 16(3), 317-317.
- Huffcutt, A. I., Roth, P. L., & McDaniel, M. A. (1996). A meta-analytic investigation of cognitive ability in employment interview evaluations: Moderating characteristics and implications for incremental validity. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. 81(5), 459-473.
- Johnson, J., Holcombe, M., Simms, G., & Wilson, D. (1993, Jan.) Writing to learn in a content area. *The Clearing House*, 66(3), 155-158.
- Joliffe, D. A. (1995). Discourse, interdiscursivity, and instruction. In Petraglia, J., Ed., *Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kiefer, K., LeCourt, D., Reid, S., & Wyrick, J. (1998). A fuller definition of writing to learn. Retrieved Oct. 9, 2004, from <http://wac.colostate.edu/intro/pop4a.cfm>
- Knoblauch, C. H. & Brannon, L. (1983, Sept.). Writing as Learning through the Curriculum, *College English*, 45(5), 465-474.
- Langer, J. A. & Applebee, A. N. (1987). *How writing shapes thinking*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Lemire, D. (2001). Brief report: an introduction to learning styles for college teachers. *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 32(1), 86+.
- Levine, T. (n.d.). The top 10 questions most often asked by interviewers. Retrieved Oct. 9, 2004, from <http://www.net-temps.com/careerdev/index.htm?type=topics&topic=interviewing&id=184>
- Martin, C. (2004). *Boost your interview I.Q.* New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Maurer, T. J., Solamon, J. M., Andrews, K. D., & Troxtel, D. D. (2001). Interviewee coaching, preparation strategies, and response strategies in relation to performance in situational employment interviews: An extension of Maurer, Solamon, and Troxtel (1998). *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86(4), 0021-9010.
- Mayher, J. S., Lester, N. B., & Pradl, G. M. (1983). *Learning to write/Writing to learn*. Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc.
- Medley, H. A. (1992). *Sweaty palms: The neglected art of being interviewed*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.
- Murray, D. (1981). Write before writing. In Tate, G., & Corbett, E., *The writing teacher's sourcebook* (pp. 170-173). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Palmer, D. K., Campion, M. A., & Green, P. C. (1999). Interviewing training for both applicant and interviewer. In Eder, R. W. & Harris, M. M. (Eds.). *The employment interview handbook* (pp. 337-351). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Parker, R. P. & Goodkin, V. (1987). *The consequences of writing*. Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc.
- Penrose, A. M. & Sitko, B. M. (Eds.). (1993). *Hearing ourselves think: Cognitive research in the college writing classroom*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Perry, A. & Goldberg, C. (1998, Jan.). Who gets hired: Interviewing skills are a prehire variable. *Journal of Career Planning & Employment*, 58(2), 47-55. Retrieved Oct. 15, 2004, from ProQuest database.
- Posthuma, R. A., Morgeson, F. P., & Campion, M. A. (2002). Beyond employment interview validity: A comprehensive narrative review of recent research and trends over time. *Personnel Psychology*. 55(1), 1+.

Ralston, S.M., & Kirkwood, W.G. (1999). The trouble with applicant impression management. *Journal of Business & Technical Communication*, 13, 190-208.

Reaves, R., Flowers, J., & Jewell, L. (1993), Effects of Writing-to-Learn activities on the content knowledge, retention, and attitudes of secondary vocational agriculture students. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 34(3), 34-40.

Smart, K. (2004, June). Articulating skills in the job search. *Business Communication Quarterly*. 67(2), 198-205.

Stevens, C. K., & Kristof, A. L. (1995). Making the right Impression: A field study of applicant impression management during job interviews, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 80(5), 0021-9010.

Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetic Learning Styles. Retrieved Oct. 9, 2004, from http://www.ubs-translations.org/itedu/web_training/2adultlearn/audio_visual_kinesthetic.htm

Washington, T. (1995). *Interview power: Selling yourself face to face*. Bellevue, WA: Mount Vernon Press.

Winning the battle of the nerves. (2003). CareerBuilder Employment Classified Advertising Section, Orlando Sentinel, Nov. 30, 2003.

Writing Across the Curriculum in the College of Arts and Sciences, State University of West Georgia. Retrieved Oct. 9, 2004, from <http://www.westga.edu/~wac/wac/wtl/>

Zinsser, W. (1988). *Writing to learn*. New York: Harper & Row.