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Improving Interviewing and Conversational Skills using "Speed Interviewing"

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Abstract

A great deal of research focuses on the importance of effective interviewing skills across professions and interpersonal settings. This activity, based on “speed dating,” is designed to improve students’ interviewing skills. Specifically, the activity develops listening and probing skills by having students conduct mini interviews without preparation. The lack of preparation forces students to rely only on their listening and probing skills instead of an interview protocol. To increase difficulty, the questions can be tailored to employment or internship interviews to help the interviewees prepare while their partners practice listening and asking probing questions. This activity can also be modified to help students work on basic conversation skills in a variety of communication courses.

Courses

Research Methods, Interviewing, Interpersonal and Health Communication, Public Speaking and Business and Professional Speaking.

Objectives

- To apply principles of interviewing, specifically listening and probing skills.
- To appreciate the critical role listening plays in interviewing.
- To identify individual student’s barriers to listening effectively.
- To expand students’ use of probing (secondary) questions while avoiding question pitfalls.

Introduction and Rationale

Providing students with “real-world” contexts to practice effective interviewing skills, both as interviewer and as interviewee, can mean the difference between their achieving desired outcomes versus missing opportunities in future internship and employment interviews. Practicing these skills can also afford students the chance to analyze, assess, improve, and apply listening skills. I created this “interview speed dating” activity because I noticed that in previous interviewing activities, students were adept at creating interview protocols but, during the interview, they merely moved from one question to the next without listening and probing any of the interviewees’ answers. This activity rewards students for improving these skills repeatedly in a fun environment. This activity works well in an interviewing or research methods course, but can also be used in interpersonal, relational, or public speaking courses because it can help students improve their conversation skills. This activity would also work well in a health

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communication course to meet the demand for interviewing skills in various healthcare settings (for examples, see Percival, 2014; Wilson & Horman, 2013; Wong, Cheung, Lee, Cheung, Leung, Wong, & Chan, 2007).

In the class periods leading up to this activity, students will have learned basic interviewing skills, such as how to phrase their questions in an open-ended manner to elicit more detailed answers as well as how to avoid question pitfalls (Stewart & Cash, 2013). Question pitfalls include asking yes or no questions, asking leading or loaded questions, asking two questions at once (double barrel), or asking an open question before immediately following it with a closed question (open-to-closed switch) such as, “Why did you choose a communication major? Was it because of the internship opportunities?” (Stewart & Cash, 2013).

Before beginning, I make sure to frame this activity as one that will specifically help students work on their listening and probing skills. I also incorporate some research that discusses the importance and difficulty in learning to be good listeners, including research that suggests note-taking improves listening comprehension (Gur, Dilci, Coskun, & Delican, 2013). Additionally, I emphasize the fact that a great deal of research has focused upon improving interviewing skills in various professions, such as social work (Rogers & Welch, 2009), law enforcement (Fisher, 2010; Walsh & Bull, 2010), and health care (Percival, 2014; Wilson & Horman, 2013; Wong, Cheung, Lee, Cheung, Leung, Wong, & Chan, 2007). This connection to professional and/or other interpersonal settings also makes this activity pertinent in a variety of communication courses. Addressing some barriers to listening may be beneficial. I address the barriers to effective listening, such as environmental, psychological and physiological barriers (Adler, Elmhurst & Lucas, 2013) at the end of the activity, which provides the students with the information at the perfect time--just when many students realize that they need to improve their listening skills.¹²

Description of the Activity

For this activity, I prepare a numbered list of fun questions. Questions include¹³: 1) If you could have any super power, what would it be? 2) If you could live anywhere in the world, where would you choose? 3) What is your biggest pet peeve? 4) If you could meet anyone famous, dead or alive, whom would you choose? 5) What is your ultimate dream job? 6) Tell me something interesting about your hometown. 7) What is your favorite season? 8) If you could trade places with someone famous for a week, whom would you choose? 9) Who is your favorite fictional character? 10) What is your favorite holiday?¹⁴

Next, I start the class by arranging the desks or tables in one long row, making it easy for one side of the room to move down one chair easily with each partner turn (as with speed dating). Before we begin, we take a minute to review some of the

¹² See Adler, Elmhurst and Lucas (2013) for a comprehensive chapter on listening, including assumptions, barriers, listening styles, and tips.

¹³ Please see Appendix A for a list of sample questions.

¹⁴ Please note that none of these questions include the “and why?” because I want students to include that in their interview. Because most usually forget, after the first 1-2 rounds, when we pause to change seats, I remind them to be sure they are asking *why*.

interviewing basics, such as using open-ended questions, avoiding question pitfalls, and adding different types of probing questions (e.g., informational, restatement, mirror, nudging, and clearinghouse probes) (Stewart & Cash, 2013). With students sitting in the seats that I arranged, I designate one side to be the interviewers and one side to be the interviewees.¹⁵ I choose one student to pick a number from 1-20 (or however many questions I have prepared).¹⁶ I then read to the class the question that corresponds to the number called. The interviewers in the room are then given approximately fifteen seconds to write the question down along with anything else, such as one follow up question (although I encourage them to follow the interviewees' responses). I encourage them to take notes while also maintaining eye contact and rapport as they have learned in previous class meetings.

I also instruct interviewees to be honest, but reticent. This means that they should answer closed-ended questions with short, one word answers while open-ended questions will be answered with longer answers. Fortunately, usually the interviewers who make this mistake realize it immediately and work to correct it during the rest of the interview.

The interview times may be adjusted to fit into the full length of the class period, but I generally let each interview last three and one-half to four minutes. A bell may be rung to signal the final thirty seconds so that interviewers can ask one final question and wrap up the interview. Then one side of the room moves down one seat and proceeds as before. During the exercise, the instructor can alternate which side of the room is doing the interviewing. I usually switch sides every 3-4 interviews because, while I want each student to experience both roles, I find that students want a few immediate chances to correct their mistakes as interviewers. By the end of the class period, students should have had the opportunity to be the interviewer and interviewee in nearly equal amounts and will have had a different partner each time, depending on class size.

Interviewees can be given the opportunity to practice their employment interviewing skills by changing some or all of the questions to reflect the types of questions they might be asked in employment interviews. Appendix A ends with a few sample employment interview questions that work well with this activity. I usually add a few of these questions in with the fun ones. Students have said that they liked being asked employment-type interview questions in the middle of a fun activity so that they could gain experience answering serious questions and practice their demeanor for future real-world interviews while in a relaxed environment.

Debriefing

I save a few minutes at the end of the class to debrief the students on what they learned about their listening and probing skills and what they would do differently in future interviews. During this portion of the activity, we discuss how difficult it is to juggle listening with building and upholding rapport as well as note-taking during the interview, and then immediately following up with an appropriate comment or question

¹⁵ In some classrooms, I have had to arrange the seats in a circle, with an inner and outer circle. This also works well.

¹⁶ Putting the questions on a PowerPoint, with one question per slide, also works nicely. If you do this, students do not need the extra time to write the question down.

that indicates they were listening to their partner. At this time, we often discuss barriers to effective listening and tips for improving listening skills.

Students have often commented that this was a difficult activity because they did not realize how poor their listening skills were, especially when outside their comfort zone. Though this activity is primarily based around interviewing, students are able to identify how their struggles to listen effectively, sustain focus, and ask probing questions also translate to weak conversational skills. Some students have mentioned that they are glad that they have the opportunity to work on their conversational weaknesses before entering into internship or business situations. Students have commented that when they were being interviewed (and also in regular conversations), it was easy to tell when someone was not paying attention to what they were saying. We then discuss how this changes the path of interviews and conversations. This is a great opportunity to connect back to important workplace implications whether in healthcare, business, and even legal settings as well as in other interpersonal and relational contexts.

Here are sample questions I use to guide the debriefing:

1. What was easy/difficult about this activity?
2. After this activity, what are some strengths and weaknesses you identified about yourself as an interviewer? How can you continue to work on any weaknesses?
3. Interviewees: Could you tell when your interviewer was paying attention to what you were sharing? How? What were some verbal and nonverbal cues?
4. Interviewees: When you noticed your partner was not listening to your answers, how did that affect your participation in the interview?
5. For those of you who said that you had troubling listening to your partner's answers, what do you see as *your* most common barrier to listening (environmental, psychological, or physiological)? Why do you think that is? Be specific.
5. Did you have a hard time staying focused for the entirety of the interview? Why do you think that is? What can you do to practice sustained focus?
6. What question pitfalls were you most likely to commit? What did you do after you realized you committed them?
7. What probing questions did you use the most? Why do you think you relied on that type more than the others? How does that change the path of the interview?

Appraisal

Overall, students' listening and probing skills improve a great deal through this activity. They often begin frustrated because they find it difficult to think of probing questions on the spot (let alone to phrase them properly), but they improve immensely by the end of the activity. In addition, some of the questions are easier to probe than others, which provides varying levels of difficulty to the activity. If interviewers continue to struggle with probing questions, it helps to have the interviewees identify the probing questions they did hear while being interviewed. Doing this can help boost the confidence of the struggling interviewer. Interviewees can also share where they thought a good probing question was missed, such as by saying, "After I shared that I see myself as

having three different hometowns, I thought you would follow up by asking me *why* I feel that way.” You can utilize mini-debriefings after each round as needed by the students. In the first few rounds, I typically save approximately one minute for interviewees to share their impressions with their interviewers and then for both to share with the class.

Many students mention how deceptively tiring this activity is. This leads to discussions of how taxing mindful conversations can be and what it means to be fully engaged in an interview or conversation. I tell them to imagine that they are doctors or nurses who have to essentially interview dozens of patients each day or social workers who have to figure out the diverse needs of their (sometimes reticent) clients. We discuss the potentially serious implications of professionals losing focus or trying to multitask. Additionally, hearing their own classmates say that they could easily tell who was paying attention and listening versus who was not teaches the students that they cannot so easily “fool” the other party in these interactions. Therefore, an added take-away for the students is often the realization that “pseudo listening” does not fool relational partners in real-life settings, either.

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Appendix A: Sample Interview Questions

- 1) If you could have any super power, what would it be?
- 2) If you could live anywhere in the world, where would you choose?
- 3) What is your biggest pet peeve?
- 4) If you could meet anyone famous, dead or alive, whom would you choose?
- 5) What is your favorite board game?
- 6) Tell me something interesting about your hometown.
- 7) What is your favorite season?
- 8) If you could trade places with someone famous for a week, whom would you choose?
- 9) Who is your favorite fictional character?
- 10) What is your favorite holiday?
- 11) If you could choose anyone in the world to be your roommate, whom would you choose?
- 12) If you could change one thing about your campus, what would it be?
- 13) Who is your biggest role model?
- 14) If you had to eat only one food for a week, what would you choose (assuming nutrition and survival were not an issue)?
- 15) What would your personal theme song be?
- 16) If you could live in any era (20s, 30s, 40s, etc.) what would you choose?
- 17) What is your ultimate dream job?
- 18) What is your biggest weakness?
- 19) If you had to describe yourself in one word, what would it be?
- 20) Where do you see yourself in ten years?
- 21) Why did you choose your major?
- 22) What is the biggest lesson you learned in college?
- 23) What is your best personality trait?
- 24) Describe an ideal company to work for.
- 25) Explain why an employer would want to hire you.