Interviews Live: Telling Your Story To Employers

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Background:

Preparing for job interviews can be a nerve racking and somewhat alien proposition whether you are new to the process or have some previous experience. There are multiple factors to consider: What questions will I be asked? What are the best things for me to talk about? What will this person who I have never met before think of me? Where should I look? What should I do with my fidgety hands? From the words that come out of your mouth to the strength of your voice to the body language you display, there are a range of elements at play.

As careers consultants here at Warwick, we deliver workshops and talk about all these things regularly. We run small group exercises and individual mock interviews. But with our performance backgrounds (one in musical performance and the other in drama education) we wondered if there was a way to involve a large number of students in a format where they could understand more deeply the perspective of employers at a job interview. We also wondered if elements of "forum theatre" (where the audience is invited to coach "actors" in a scenario to a better outcome) could be harnessed.

We therefore piloted a workshop format for students where student actors would be interviewed live at the front of the room by a variety of employers who recruit from Warwick. The approach we took is summarise below:

1. Recruit a group of student actors to play the role of candidates for a job interview.
2. Workshop the actors to develop a model where the audience would see "candidates" being interviewed by employers. The participants would then hear feedback from the employers before moving to break out rooms to coach the "candidates". The interviews would then be run for a second time.
3. Put on an Interviews Live Workshop for 60 final year students where the model above would be piloted and developed.
4. Conduct video interviews with members of the student audience, the employers and the actors to understand what had worked and what could be developed and to gage the impact of the intervention.
5. Edit the interviews into a short video (which can be viewed at Interviews Masterclass link).
6. Seek funding from IATL to develop the model further and evaluate impact.

Development of the Model Using IATL Funding

We delivered a further 3 workshops at Warwick using IATL funding which was used to pay actors for their time. We also presented a short demonstration of the model at the 2016 AGCAS (Association of Careers Advisory Services) Annual Conference where careers staff from other universities discussed the value of the model and its elements. Below we have summarised what we learned that might be useful for others considering this type of intervention and also interesting insights about interviews that emerged during delivery.

Selecting Actor Ensemble

When we initially recruited student actors, we chose to conduct a traditional "job interview" with standard questions and then asked them to role play different "types" of student – the over-confident candidate, the nervous candidate, the verbose candidate etc. However, when it came to our second round of recruitment, we choose to invite candidates to a drama workshop style assessment (including drama games and group work) where we looked at the ability of candidates to:

- Work and collaborate in a team
- Create and test out new ideas in an open and experimental format
- Handle constructive criticism

We did not feel we could assess these capabilities adequately through a traditional interview and this new format enabled the group of actors we selected to begin the process of gelling as a group.

The last bullet point above was particularly important for us. We had worried that asking current students to be "critiqued" in front of an audience of peers by employers and by the peers themselves could have a negative effect on THEIR confidence at interview. So we needed to be sure that we had mitigated against this happening.

The following comments from one of the student actors demonstrate how they experienced the process:

> "On the interview process, it was really good that we were given freedom to come up with our own ideas. So we decided in a group what we were going to do, how we were going to do it, we split the roles. In the rehearsals what was good is that we were not only being prepared for the event but having the chance to develop our skills as people, as team workers." Nikita, Economics Student.

Getting the Audience to Interact

In our first model, we sent segments of the audience to break-out rooms where facilitators encouraged groups to deliver constructive feedback to "in-role" actors. Apart from being a logistical challenge, it was also a challenge to promote dialogue and discussion among a group of 30 students who may not have met before. We presumed students would engage with in-role characters. The reality was that they did not have time to become comfortable and develop the trust needed to offer opinions in an open forum.

In subsequent workshops we replaced the "break out room" with interview scoring sheets and live polling technology which engaged the audience in a process of analysis and

reflection. As the audience vote resulted in candidates being gradually eliminated from the selection process, their opinions had a direct bearing on what they were seeing happen on stage.

The value of this tool was in creating a visual representation of audience opinion which could be explored and dissected. An example of this live poll is shown in figure 1 below.
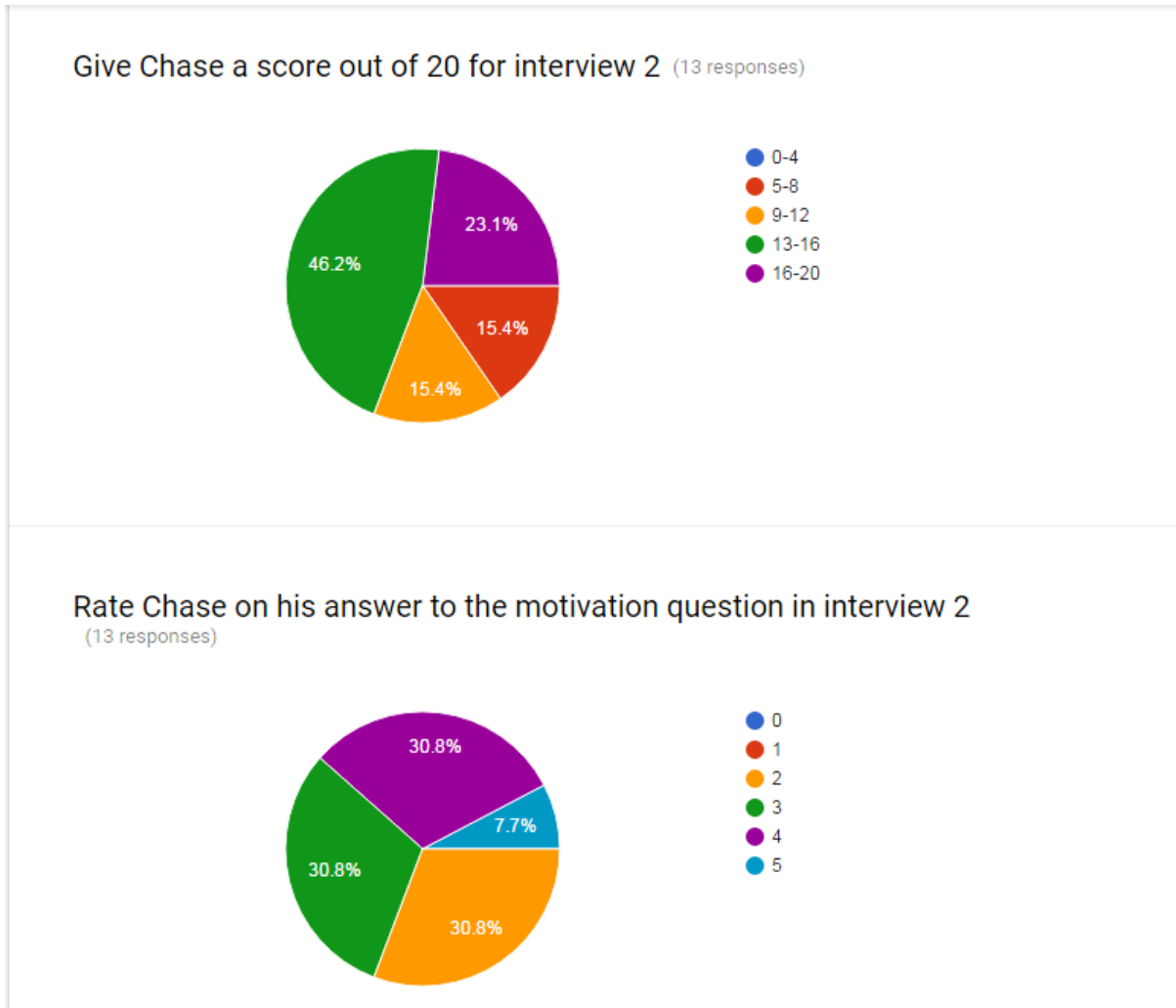
Give Chase a score out of 20 for interview 2 (13 responses)

- 0-4
- 5-8
- 9-12
- 13-16
- 16-20

46.2%
23.1%
15.4%
15.4%

Rate Chase on his answer to the motivation question in interview 2
(13 responses)

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

30.8%
7.7%
30.8%
30.8%

Figure 1 – Google forms on line polling – AGCAS Conference 2016

Student Centred Learning

As mentioned, we found the use of scoring sheets and live polling useful in gathering and exploring the audience reaction to the interviews they witnessed. This allowed the subject matter to be guided by the results of the polling. We consistently found that there was a stark contrast between who the employer panel (typically 3-4 employers) would select as best interviewees and who the audience would choose. This seemed to revolve around the idea of "personality/fit" or "likability". Where students seemed to focus very much on the ability of candidates to "do the job" now, the employers seemed more focused on the potential of the candidate to do the job alongside an idea of "personality fit". One employer

commented, "We often feel as though we must have told the candidate to leave their personality at the door because that's the way it feels".

This "personality factor" was picked up on by the actors and the audience as evidenced by the following comments:

> *"For me it was a bit of an experiment, because on the day I decided to act the role of a person who has really prepared for the interview, who had done their research….but I did not engage with the interviews, I did not shake hands, I did not make eye contact. So it was an experiment for me to see if they (employers) would go for someone who really knows their stuff but is not so sociable."* Nikolas, Economics Student

> *"In the last interview, I think it was Zak, he was late. But he got through and what I think got him through was his personality. Whereas when I was preparing I was thinking about what the employer would want to hear, but perhaps employers don't like it."* Ai, HR Management and Employer Relations.

This mix of skills, performance, personality, appearance is a complex one and calls into question the reliability of different interview models. Employers themselves found involvement in the project useful as they met counterparts from different organisations and found themselves questioning their own interview process. One employer commented:

> *"I thought it was a really unique and innovative way of showing students what they are going to be facing in real life situations….For us as employers it was really good in terms of challenging our misconceptions or preconceptions of what candidates bring to the table and it gives us the opportunity to re-evaluate what we are actually looking for at interview"* Ronnie Henderson, Graduate Outreach Officer, Ark Teacher Training.

Our workshop could not cover all elements of the job interview but we were able to mention to students the importance of "controlling what you can control in the outcome of the job interview and being aware that there are some elements that you cannot control" (as evidenced during the live model!).

First and Last Impressions

One of the aspects of the interview that we wanted to focus on with our session was the importance of first and last impressions. One of the candidates was deliberately late to the interview and although unscripted, the reaction of the employers to this inconvenience was plain to see. Employers commented on clothing, attentiveness to questions, energy levels and facial expressions. The audience was invited to score candidates and comment on initial and final impression created. The successful candidate in our last session with students had been cautioned by an employer about liberally using the term "cheers" during his interview. In his final interview, he demonstrated an excellent command of professional language and then as he left the room for the last time, turned to the panel and offered a parting "cheers". It brought the house down and demonstrated the value of personality and not being constrained by technique/convention but being aware of it.

Impact

In our original submission for funding we outlined a range of measures we would use to gage the impact of our Interviews live model. In our pilot session we interviewed employers, audience members and student actors. In subsequent sessions, we further interviewed employers and actors. Finally, we decided to offer follow up group sessions where participants in the workshop could reflect no their learning and gain further support with interview technique. The following findings emerged in terms of impact:

1. Student actors reported they felt increased confidence at speaking in front of a group, working in a team and moving out of their comfort zone in a learning environment.
2. Student actors enjoyed the freedom to bring the concerns they felt fellow students experience in preparing for job interviews into their role play. They also enjoyed the opportunity to be involved in the design of the workshop.
3. Audience/participants in the workshop stated that they understood more clearly the importance of first impressions - handshakes, eye contact, vocal energy.
4. Audience/participants in the workshop stated that could see how personality had influenced employers and that while preparation and "technique" was important, employers are human and are interested in unique personal qualities.
5. Employers commented that the experience of interacting with recruiters from other organisations on a panel had allowed them to reflect on their own interview style and question, in some situations, their own process for evaluating candidates.

The holy grail for us was being able to track how the audience/participants in the workshop had taken the learning forwards and could identify it as having helped them secure a job. Our attempts to organise follow up sessions, however, did not attract enough students to be able to evaluate this.

Ways Forward.

We feel that this is a very valuable model for delivering interview skills training on multiple levels:

1. Students themselves are involved in the design and delivery of skills training. Through this involvement they gain confidence in areas of public speaking, working in teams and moving out of their comfort zones (which is a capability employers regularly target).
2. Audience/participants are able to visualise and experience the reaction of employers to different candidate behaviours. This learning is nuanced and focused on not just interview "technique" but on other factors such as "bringing your personality with you into the room."
3. Employers benefit from working with counterparts in different organisations and from reflection on their own interview style and process.
4. As practitioners, we developed our own ability to work alongside students to deliver training in a collaborative process.

Thanks to.

Student actors/collaborators – **Dominic, Rosanna, Emily, Nikita, Chase, Jacob, Kirsti**

Employers – **Dave Westbury (Astrazeneca), Roz Lawrence (PwC), Ollie Longworth and Chris Banks (Teach First), Faye Stockley (Sauce Recruitment), Ronnie Henderson (Ark Teacher Training), John Brown (RBS), Lorna Bytheway and Andrea Skelly (Unitemps)**

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