Designing University Courses Based on the Job Application Process

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Background to this article

Dr. Pocklington teaches training courses in the job-application process at the Technische Fachhochschule Berlin (a university of applied sciences soon to be renamed "Beuth Hochschule fuer Technik Berlin") in Germany. Students there study one of numerous possible academic programs in engineering or business. They generally have had 4-9 years of secondary-school English; however, most English courses are interspersed with foreign students who have had even less formal instruction. His observations below on this topic stem from nearly two decades of teaching such courses. Dr. Pocklington is coauthor of "Das professionelle 1x1: Bewerben auf Englisch: Leitfaden mit Tipps und Mustern für den erfolgreichen Eintritt in den internationalen Arbeitsmarkt" [Applications in English: Guidelines with Tips and Samples for a Successful Entry into the Employment Market]. Jackie Pocklington, Patrik Schulz and Erich Zettl. Cornelsen, 2007.

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It is really crazy. Governments invest heavily in the university education of its young people preparing them to launch international careers. Yet when aspiring graduates attempt to open the door of career opportunity, they find it locked. Negligently universities fail to supply their promising students with the key that opens that door: the skills and strategies for successfully navigating one's way through the job application process.

Courses on training university students the skills they will require for the job application process can be designed to overcome this deficit. Not only do the aims of such courses need to be clearly defined, moreover the challenges that an instructor will face have to be recognized so that he can effectively design the courses and then manage them to a successful conclusion. In the course design proposed in this paper participants assume roles on both sides of the job application process: On the one hand, the participants form fictional personnel departments of large international companies that have a job vacancy; on the other hand, they assume the role of the applicants for two positions in companies other than their own. This alternating role play extends over the entire duration of the semester-long course.

I. The Course Aims

The course aims entail understanding 1) the various stages of the job application process, 2) the underlying strategies that drive the activities therein, as well as 3) the design that goes into the application documents and the interview to enhance one's chances for success. In particular when the course is designed for non-native speakers of English, some attention has to be devoted to developing the English skills required for various activities conducted in the job-application process.

Understanding the Stages and Strategies of the Job Application Process

Many students have little understanding of some aspects of the job-application process, in particular as viewed from the perspective of the employer. They are only familiar with the phase of the process after a job ad is made public. Before this point in the process they cannot imagine what this process looks like from the perspective of the employer. Once students become familiar with the entire process from both sides of the desk, then they can better comprehend the employers' mindset for methodically and expediently conducting the process. Accordingly, students better recognize their own tasks in this process: All application documents should be designed to make it as easy as possible for the potential employer to recognize the correlation between the tasks/responsibilities of the offered position and the applicant's own qualifications in the form of work experience and education as well as computer, language and personal skills.

Applicants have to design their resumes (or CVs) and cover letters in such a manner that the potential reader easily recognizes that the applicant possesses the desired qualifications for the offered or potential position. Regarding the resume, 1) there should be no superfluous information, 2) what information is presented must be differentiated by its degree of importance, and 3) the most important information must be placed as far up the page (reverse chronology) and as far left as possible because the reader takes greater notice of information located in these area of a page.

Effective Design

As the first of the two written application documents to be read, the cover letter primarily functions as the attention catcher. It should capture the potential employer's interest in the applicant's profile. This is accomplished by demonstrating that the applicant can perform the most significant tasks of the offered position through their work experience and education. It pays to distinguish the requirements (and then correspondingly the applicant's qualifications) into primary (specific to the tasks/responsibilities of the position offered) and secondary (more universally desired

qualifications).[1] As many applicants only address the secondary requirements of the position, it is strategically effective for our students to specifically demonstrate their qualifications for the primary requirements. Immediately this design of the cover letter will receive the favorable attention of the potential employer.

It should be noted that many German students familiar with the function and design of German application documents will simply try to transfer the familiar German function and design elements into the corresponding English documents. Unfortunately, this does not work as the German *Lebenslauf* [*course of life* = resume] has up till recently been designed as a kind of monolithic, universally applicable document for all application cases, i.e. they were not customized to the specifics of the position on offer or that was potentially available. The task of customization has been entirely up to the *Anschreiben* or cover letter. The letter had to cover all the requirements, burgeoning accordingly in size and significance. By contrast, in English the cover letter is designed to generate interest in the application, thereby requiring the resume to address all/most of the requirements, making it imperative for the resume to be customized just like the cover letter.

Not unlike the application documents, job interviews too need to be well prepared. The same underlying principle applies: Consciously target the primary and secondary requirements with answers to interview questions that make it easy for the potential employer to recognize that the applicant's profile clearly meets the criteria for the offered position. A list of the primary and secondary requirements can be generated based on the job description, the requirements found in the job ad, and one's own understanding (after research) of the position. To the right of this list then should stand one's own qualifications that correspond to these requirements. Wherever possible, the applicant should work out one or two good examples of each of his qualifications demonstrating how they were applied in a business (or other) context. The examples make the applicant's assertions credible. Based on each requirement a number of potential employer questions can be anticipated, and then the responses should be worked out in such a way that the connection to the requirements of the offered position becomes evident. These responses should not be memorized verbatim by heart; rather one should have key-word messages in mind that one can expound upon by speaking freely. With some interview practice, one can learn to answer a variety of interview questions effectively.

Once the responses to the various requirements have been worked out and practiced, the applicant should feel able to approach the interview with eagerness – not trepidation. He approaches it with attitude: "Give me a question! I want to tell you what I can offer to you." When the questions are posed, the answers should follow like they are coming from a confident card player with an unbeatable hand ready to play trump cards. The applicant is not cocky, rather confident that he is up to the job: It should already be evident to the applicant that his profile matches the requirements of the offered position. Now all he has to do is to make this information clear to the interviewer.

Language Development

Not only will courses designed for training the skills of the job application process focus on understanding the entire application process and usage of effective design at important stages in the process, it will necessarily have to devote some attention to the language development of non-native speakers of English. Such students will invariably be influenced by their native tongue in their usage of English. Accordingly, there are predictable usage errors that will be generated due to differences in expression as well as spelling and punctuation. Exercises that focus on these areas can help diminish the number of errors that otherwise are likely to be generated.

In the case of native speakers of German, a language closely related to English, many expressions related to the job application process are translated incorrectly into English in a false-friend like manner: Germans speak of what *semester* they are in at university instead of *year*; they *absolve* or *make an internship/apprenticeship* instead of *serve* or *do* them; they *collect experience* instead of *gain/acquire/gather* it; they *have *made an experience* instead of *have had* it; they *make civil service* instead of *do/serve alternative service*; they talk about the *pros and *contras* of a proposal instead of its *pros and cons*.

Typical spelling errors produced by German writers are as follows due to the spelling of the related German cognate terms: *adress, *assistent, *englisch, *hobbys, *industrie, *personal (in the sense of *personnel*), *college (in the sense of *colleague*), *Januar, *Februar,* Mai,* Juni,* Juli,* Dezember*. Similarly, German usage of articles differs from English, which usually forgoes the definite article *the* when talking about "nature" or "industry" when there is no post modification, or which unlike German includes the indefinite article *a* when naming a profession: "I am *a* student/teacher." Finally, German punctuation usage is typically transposed into English:
- numbers *32.452* and *23,45* should read as *32,452* and *23.45* respectively
- dates: *03.05.2008* should read *3-5-2008* or *3/5/2008* [not to mention the confusion Americans may have in interpreting this date!]
- quotation marks: *„~" should appear above the line as in "~"

Although the job-application course is not designed primarily as an English-language course, participants are well motivated to acquire the language skills required for carrying out the tasks at hand due to the meaningful context. When language acquisition is designed into a course as the means to an end instead of as the aim of the course itself, the learning effect is significantly enhanced.

II. Challenges in Course Design and Execution

Although there is obvious need for courses to prepare university students to operate effectively in the job application process, there are various daunting challenges that face an instructor when designing and realizing such courses:

- The course design has to be distinctly different depending on whether the students participating in the course are members of the same academic program (or at least similar ones) or of disparate programs.
- Students often require assistance in determining what types of employment positions exactly they can actually take on once they have graduated from their academic program. The fewer the years they have studied, the more likely it is that they will require time to become knowledgeable about this matter.
- As the course role play is based on the interactivity of the students, the instructor has to ensure that the overall role play functions properly on a week-by-week basis; otherwise the course operations can break down due to lack of commitment by some students.
- Time outside the classroom will be demanded of the instructor at various stages in the role play when he has to provide feedback to the participants' various job application documents.
- The instructor has to ensure that all participants customize each of their application documents. The fact that participants are required to apply to two distinctly different positions provides them with an opportunity to demonstrate effectively that they have customized their profile sufficiently to meet most/all requirements of the offered position, thereby significantly enhancing their chances for being selected to participate in the interview stage.

Course Design Based on the Participants' Academic Program

The specific design of a course for training university students to effectively deal with the job application process is contingent upon whether the participants are all members of the same academic program or not. If the participants are all members of the same or similar academic programs, the students will have a fairly good understanding of what courses the other course participants have taken or will take on up to graduation. Moreover, they are likely to have some common understanding what kinds of positions they could apply for after graduation. The situation is radically different when the participants are students from various disparate programs. In this case, virtually no-one has any idea what the other course participants do exactly in their program let alone what kind of employment possibilities exist for graduates. We will return to this topic in Section III below entitled *Alternative Course Designs.*

Overcoming Lack of Knowledge of Potential Employment Opportunities

As the course participants are required to come up with potential positions that graduates of their academic program could apply for, the success of the role play is dependent on the participants having at least a basic idea what these positions could actually be. In courses designed for participants of the same academic program or similar programs, the degree to which the participants have some idea regarding future prospects is primarily dependent on the degree to which they have worked or

studied in their particular field: The greater the experience they have acquired, the better the awareness they will have regarding potential employment opportunities after graduation. As long as the instructor is dealing with a homogeneous group of participants of the same academic program or similar programs, he can compensate for any lack of awareness on the side of the participants by providing them with relevant information on such positions by investigating this matter and consulting with lecturers from this program.

In a course designed for participants of disparate academic programs it becomes much more difficult to deal with the lack of knowledge of the participant regarding potential employment opportunities. An instructor would be overwhelmed if he were expected to research the job market for each participant of a different program. In a course with participants of disparate academic programs the burden of investigating these matters has to be placed on to the participants themselves. They can conduct their own search of the job market for entry-level positions that graduates of their program could apply for. They can consult their lecturers as well on these matters to come up with two distinctly different positions that they realistically could apply for. The instructor can collect such job descriptions over time and have them in waiting when participants of later courses require assistance in their search for such positions.

Acquiring Solidarity Regarding Commitment to the Role Play Responsibilities

Another serious challenge that an instructor faces in managing the extended role-play operations throughout the semester is to get the participants to attend the course dutifully to the end (particularly when the course is attended on a voluntary basis). Moreover, he has to ensure that at every stage of the role play everyone carries out their particular responsibilities. Although the interplay between companies and applicants is relatively straight-forward, if at any point in the development of the extended role play any of the parties fails to carry out his required tasks, the process breaks down blocking subsequent stages of the process. Consequently, the instructor is forced to check back with the course participants on a regular basis to determine where there are impasses and then, if the students cannot work them out among themselves, find ways to deal with them. This regulating process not only occurs in class but to a great extent through exchanges of emails between companies and applicants and through the issuing of circular emails with directives by the instructor. Running the course is very much an intensive, hands-on endeavor. Throughout the course to ensure that it works, the instructor not only has to actively oversee the operations of the extended role play, he also has to continually make appeals of solidarity to course participants to remain committed to participation.

Providing Input and Feedback

In a course requiring a great deal of control and micro-management by the instructor to ensure the successful development of the extended role-play as well as the continual feedback on formulation and design of application documents, the instructor is challenged by the amount of time he has to invest in the course outside the classroom. It is advisable to set up a Moodle account, which can provide a platform for providing course participants with access to course materials and which can serve as an email pool for contacting everyone in the course whether collectively, individually or in defined groups. On a regular basis circular emails need to be written to bring everyone up to date on what the current assignments are and what deadlines have to be met. Moreover, at various stages in the roll play students generate application-related materials (job descriptions, job ads, cover letters, resumes, interview questions and prepared interview answers); there are surges of student-produced materials that the instructor proofreads to provide feedback. Feedback to these documents has to be returned quickly because the participants are otherwise unable to move on to the subsequent stage in the role-play process.

Comprehending the Need for Customization

The main aim of the course is to raise awareness in participants for the need to customize their applications on a case-by-case basis. For many participants it is already a lot of work to produce application documents for one position. When required to produce a second set for a distinctly different position, the majority of students simply change the names of the company and the offered position, as if one application prototype should suffice for all cases. In resisting the instructor's arguments for customization, participants often argue that since they have only one life, they can only create one resume. The instructor has to continually and energetically prod participants to make the extra effort required for customizing their application documents. Doubling the workload naturally means increasing the amount of proofreading; however, without the second application it would not be possible to ensure that participants would grasp the necessity of customization and put it into practice.

The instructor must check that the two applications are not virtual replicas of each other: If necessary, the documents are returned to the student for improvement. There is a positive byproduct of having two applications as well: participants can practice the job interview two times before coming to the instructor for the final job interview as an oral examination. In many cases the participants do not really grasp what is expected of them until they have had to suffer through that first interview for lack of careful preparation. The second practice interview is usually much better because they now recognize the value of proper preparation. As the customization of one's application documents and interview is a cornerstone of the conception of the course, it is a major consideration for grading the effectiveness of the application documents and the job interview.

III. Alternative Course Designs

As mentioned above in Section II, it is crucial for the design of the course to know whether the participants all are members of the same academic program or if they are a mixed group. If the participants all are enrolled in the same program or similar ones, the context of the extended role play can be conceived as an open job market: The participants organize themselves into personnel departments of particular international companies and then apply for positions of their choice that are offered by the other personnel departments of companies in the course. By contrast, in a course designed for students from disparate academic programs the role play is treated more like a planned economy in which participants are assigned to personnel departments and the applicants are assigned to specific companies to ensure the most effective execution of the role play (i.e. three participants from the same academic program should not end up member of the same personnel department, rather in different ones to ensure that each can be interviewed by the other two, who are probably the best qualified participants in the course to understand the interplay of requirements and qualifications for their specified field of work. In both types of course, the instructor will intermittently introduce exercises and information to develop application, interview and language skills with attention paid to strategies, design and language development.

Course Design for Homogeneous Groups

The following is a description of the approximate order of events in a two-hour course over one semester designed for participants from the same academic program or similar programs.

1) Instructor – Input of job descriptions. If deemed expedient, the course participants can be supplied with basic texts (for example from *Wikipedia* or *howstuffworks* on the Internet) explaining the tasks and responsibilities of potential positions that graduates of their program could apply for. As an example, graduates of a Business Administration program could apply for distinctly different entry-level positions in the disciplines of marketing, personnel, accounting and management. However, if these students have not yet had any courses in these disciplines, they can hardly be expected to write up a job description, design an effective application or do an interview for a position in such disciplines. In such cases it is advisable to supply the students with elementary texts of these fields of work.

2) Instructor – Job ad design + vocabulary. Since designing a job ad will be one of the first activities of the course, a sample job ad is employed to exemplify typical text design and expression.

3) Company – Form personnel teams. Course participants form their own personnel/HR departments (depending on the size of the course there should be a

minimum of three groups to afford every course participant the opportunity for applications to two companies other than one's own). There should be no more than six companies (between 3-5 participants each, trying to keep approximate parity in the group sizes) to still allow for effective management of the role play as it develops. These groups should represent a real international company of their choice with Internet presence so that all course participants have access to information on this company.

4) <u>Company</u> – <u>Create a job ad</u>. These personnel departments should imagine what kind of position their company could offer to a graduate of the academic program that they are enrolled in. This type of position should be researched: a job description is worked up containing a description of the tasks/responsibilities and combined with the desired applicant profile. This information should then be embedded in a job ad with company description and application details. The instructor must ensure that the vacancies created by these groups are as distinct as possible. If duplication is unavoidable, then applicants later are not allowed to apply to two similar positions.

5) <u>Instructor</u> – <u>Cover letter / resume design + vocabulary</u>. Exercises are conducted to develop skills regarding the kinds of language and design employed for the cover letter and the resume.

6) <u>Applicant</u> – <u>Two distinct applications</u>. All course participants apply for two distinctly different positions. Copies of the applications go to the companies as well as to the instructor (who processes these asap to provide critical feedback not only on language usage but also the design of the documents, in particular with regard to customization of these hopefully distinctly different documents).

7) <u>Instructor</u> – <u>Interview structure and strategies</u>. Exercises are conducted concerning the typical stages of an interview as well as preparation measures from both sides of the desk.

8) <u>Company</u> – <u>Interview preparation</u>. Each company processes the applications received, draws up a ranking list, creates a set of general questions to be asked of all interviewed candidates as well as personalized questions based on each applicant's submitted documents. It is important that the company members recognize what are effective answers to these questions: correlations between the duties/responsibilities and the applicant's profile.

9) <u>Applicant</u> – <u>Interview preparation</u>. Applicants prepare for their job interviews by anticipating the types of questions they will be asked and then consider how to answer them effectively by highlighting and exemplifying their qualifications for the offered position. They should also research the company and prepare some questions that demonstrate their interest in the company as well as the offered position. At home with fellow students course participants should practice the interview situation, including introductory small talk and closing remarks.

10) <u>Company/Applicant</u> – <u>Conduct practice interviews</u>. Over a two week period every applicant participates in two interviews. Feedback is provided by the companies and, whenever possible, the instructor.

11) <u>Instructor/Applicant</u> – <u>Conduct graded interviews</u>. As the basis for the final oral exam there is a job interview with the instructor. Applicants can select one of the two positions they had applied for earlier. Over a week in advance of the interview, applicants are required to resubmit all of the earlier application documents plus an updated version of those particular application documents that the instructor will need as the basis for preparing the exam interview. The instructor checks if the quality of the written application documents has in deed improved (The documents are graded at this point – this grade is included in the overall interview grade); then he prepares general and personalized questions for the applicants.

Course Design for Heterogeneous Groups

The following is a description of the approximate order of role-play events in a two hour course over one semester designed for participants from disparate academic programs.

1) <u>Instructor</u> – <u>Job ad design + vocabulary</u>. Since designing a job ad will be one of the first activities of the course, a sample job ad is employed to exemplify typical text design and expression.

2) <u>Applicant</u> – <u>Two distinct job descriptions</u>. Each course participant must come up with job descriptions (tasks/responsibilities and required qualifications) of two distinctly different positions that he can apply for as a graduate of the academic program that he is enrolled in. This may require some investigation on his part through the Internet or lecturers from their academic program. These two job descriptions are passed on to two different specified companies that then embed the job description into a job ad, which is then returned to the original applicant.

3) <u>Company</u> – <u>Assignment into companies</u>. Participants are organized into groups by the instructor on the basis of their academic programs in an attempt to avoid the bunching up of students from the same academic program or similar programs from becoming members of the same company. Whenever possible the two distinct job descriptions of each course participant are assigned to those companies with at least one member of the same academic program or a similar program. This rigorous mapping out the combinations of applications to specific companies by the instructor should ensure that each applicant can receive critical feedback on their application and interview from a fellow student of the same academic program or a similar program. The job descriptions are returned to the original applicant, however in the form of a job ad. Companies are free to make minor adjustments to the original job descriptions in order to adjust them to their own imagined company needs.

4) <u>Instructor</u> – <u>Cover letter / resume design + vocabulary</u>. Exercises are conducted to develop skills regarding the kinds of language and design employed for the cover letter and the resume.

5) <u>Applicant</u> – <u>Two distinct applications</u>. All course participants apply to the positions based on the job description that they originally had worked out for the companies (and returned to them in the form of job ads). Copies of the applications go to the companies as well as to the instructor (for the purpose of feedback).

The order of course events now continues with steps 7-11 discusses above concerning the course designed for participants from the same academic program or a similar program.

Summary

University students should not be graduating without first having developed skills required for successfully marketing themselves through the job application process. Such courses should be designed to develop understanding for the stages of this process as well as the underlying strategies that call for expediency and customization. Course participants need to design cover letters and resumes effectively and prepare their answers for potential interview questions to confidently point out and exemplify their qualifications in a manner that clearly corresponds to the requirements of the offered position. Concomitantly, numerous English skills can be acquired regarding expression, spelling and punctuation that are required for the job-application process.

An effective way to design a course to reach these goals is to simulate the job application process in a role play between companies and applicants that extends over the entire semester. Such a sophisticated course design has to deal with numerous challenges in order to achieve success. One of the greatest challenges to designing such a course is contingent upon the constellation of the participating students: whether they all are enrolled in the same academic program (or similar academic programs) or disparate programs. Those courses with students from disparate programs have to be much more micro-managed to ensure success. Another serious challenge comes from many students' lack of knowledge about their own discipline and potential employment opportunities. Overcoming this deficit requires either information input by the instructor or investigation of this matter by the students themselves.

Courses designed to teach skills for the job application process require a hands-on approach by the instructor who must ensure that every stage in the role play is carried out by all participants. Moreover, the instructor has to be prepared to invest a lot of effort into managing the course even outside of the classroom by writing course directives and reminders as well as by providing feedback to the documents produced by the participants.

Finally, the instructor has to ensure that all participants grasp the absolute necessity to customize each and every application as a prerequisite for success. The instructor has to be prepared to make students go back and rework their documents until they get this right.

All in all, courses designed to teach the job application process are quite demanding on participants and the instructor. However, the benefits that the students harvest at the end of the course make it worth every ounce of effort.

[1] Primary requirements pertain specifically to the main tasks and responsibilities of any particular position, i.e. these requirements will differ significantly from position to position. Corresponding qualifications that indicate that the applicant is well suited to deal with these items will be very attractive and will significantly distinguish this applicant from many other applicants who do not make the effort to customize their application documents. Secondary requirements are also important to potential employers; however, these are usually universally desirable qualities that employers seek in candidates across the board regardless of the position. These requirements include being a team player as well as an independent worker while having ambition, diligence, language and personal skills, computer skill and the like. Most guidebooks that provide advice on how to respond to interview questions normally focus on questions that deal with these secondary requirements because they are universally applicable. Although these secondary requirements can play an important role in deciding for one particular candidate over another when all else seems equivalent, they are of second rank in importance. Generally nobody would be hired for a particular skilled position missing a primary qualification or be selected solely on the basis of their secondary qualifications.