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Teaching Professional Networking: Students Building Contacts Outside the Classroom

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Teaching Professional Networking: Students Building Contacts Outside the Classroom

Abstract

This pilot study implemented a method for teaching professional networking to college business communication students. The method introduced students to data on new college graduate unemployment and underemployment, research on methods for filling open positions, and the concept of six degrees of separation. Where most examples of professional networking instruction in prior research took place exclusively in the classroom, this method required students to make and track contacts in their chosen professional fields. Student reactions were captured in reflection papers and an open response survey and analyzed qualitatively using coding and similarity comparison (Boeije, 2010). Responses were not overly surprising as students indicated learning about their career field, the importance of utilizing connections, challenges in networking, and the benefits that can come from networking. The hands-on nature of the instruction and need for networking as a skill among CTE students creates opportunities for future research.

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Introduction

Educators at all levels seek to instill in their students the skills requisite for success, which includes knowledge and skills related to employment and advancement in professional environments. There has been previous research on what educators and employers consider to be necessary job skills. Such skills range from appearance training (Freeburg & Arnett, 2010) to time management, critical thinking, and ethics (Hodge & Lear, 2011). Among these critical skills is the development of a professional network. This pilot study implemented an andragogical approach for teaching networking skills to students in an undergraduate business communication class, which included students from agriculture, automotive, and workforce education, as well as management, accounting, and marketing. The instructional method required students to actually make contact with professionals in their chosen field using personal and professional relationships they already had. While the population of this study was undergraduate students, the skill is relevant since all students will be pursuing employment or career advancement. The model is also scalable as it can be adjusted for varying class sizes and those in secondary, post-secondary, adult, and graduate career education programs.

Theoretical Framework

The study investigated the process of establishing contact with professionals in their preferred fields might influence the knowledge of undergraduate students about their preferred fields, their preparation to enter the field, and their attitudes towards the transition. Therefore, the study was based on Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), which postulates that "learning is a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (1984, p. 38). The ELT particularly focuses on learning as a process founded on concrete experiences that

are augmented by reflection, abstraction, and further experimentation. Following these four phases of the ELT, this project attempted to investigate the process of learning triggered by an authentic networking experience and the outcomes of the learning process. Even though Kolb's theory has been extensively used in different fields of education, this study provided an opportunity to apply it to authentic networking experiences in a college classroom setting.

Purpose of the Study

The primary research question guiding this study was how the experience of establishing contact with professionals in the student's preferred field would impact the career attitudes and preparation of college students. Impetus for the study came from the troubling statistics for high school and young college graduate employment rates. According to Shierholz, Sabadish, and Finio (2013), 8.8 % of college graduates between the ages of 21-24 years of age face unemployment, and 18.3% face underemployment. High school graduates will encounter an even greater struggle. According to the Economic Policy Institute (Shierholz et al., 2013), high school graduates face unemployment rates of 29.9% and underemployment rates of 51.5%. These findings paint a troubling picture for high school and younger college graduates.

The study was loosely built off Phase 3 of MacDermott's (1995) networking assignment, which required students to interview a role model in their career path. MacDermott's assignment included five phases, which included choosing a role model, conducting company research, interviewing the role model, writing a resume and cover letter, and engaging in a mock interview. While students in this study were not required to interview the individuals to whom they were referred, this is essentially what they were doing. Students were seeking the referred contact's perspectives and insights regarding the professional field the student was pursuing.

At the college level, innovative programs offering a blend of networking instruction and real-world application, such as the Zeigler Institute for Professional Development (ZIPD) at Bloomsburg University in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania, do exist; and college students in some departments might be encouraged to build a professional network. In fewer cases, career and guidance counselors at the high school level direct students to make professional contacts as part of their career development. Without direction, students are left to try to build connections by indiscriminately accepting invitations to connect on professional networking sites such as LinkedIn, attending alumni functions, or simply hoping it “just happens.”

Effective networking has been shown to be a critical aspect of the job search process (Wanberg, Kanfer, & Banas, 2000), for gaining entry into a career (Forret & Dougherty, 2001), accelerating growth within the field (Thompson, 2005), and for achieving success within careers (Torres, 2005). Networking with professionals can provide access to information about job opportunities, influence career trajectories, and also create possibilities of mentoring within a chosen field (de Janasz & Forret, 2008). It can serve as a means of “overcoming information asymmetries” (Urwin, Di Pietro, Sturgis, & Jack, 2008, p. 946) because the level one achieves within an organization correlates with the individual’s engagement with professional activities (Forret & Dougherty, 2001). Likewise, networking has been shown to relate to concurrent salary, salary growth, and career satisfaction (Wolff & Moser, 2009).

Davis and Warfield (2011) found networking to be a skill that can be taught and cultivated within academia; and de Janasz and Forret (2008) showed that by creating opportunities for undergraduate students to practice networking behaviors, faculty can enhance the networking ability of students. Segrist and Pawlow (2009) suggested that educating undergraduate students about networking was an essential step in preparing them for a career,

and Kryder (2011) presented how business communication coursework could be used as an indirect means to help students create professional networks. The instructional methods of Davis and Warfield (2011), de Janasz and Forret (2008), Segrist and Pawlow (2009), and Kryder (2011) were all limited to practice in the classroom rather than requiring students to learn through the practice of actually making contacts and tracking their network.

Instructional Methodology

The study took place in an introductory business communication class consisting of 55 total students. The assignment was given to all students and the instructor explained that while everyone would be required to complete the assignment and summary paper, they were not required to participate in the study itself and have their responses included in the findings to be analyzed. Institutional Review Board approval was granted and a doctoral student, unrelated to but familiar with the study, presented the consent forms without the instructor present, explained participant rights and fielded questions, and collected the consent forms. The primary researcher, who was the instructor for the class, was not aware of who had agreed to participate. Of the 55 students, 20 agreed to have either their summary paper or a completed survey included as data to be analyzed.

In the first step, the instructor began to lay the foundation of the importance of networking by presenting research on the employment situation for new graduates. The information that was presented was specific to new college graduates; but employment data for new high school graduates, such as those mentioned in the introduction, could be provided for appropriate groups. The research that was presented also served as the impetus for the study as it raised concerns as to the opportunities that would be available to these students upon graduation.

According to the Economic Policy Institute (Shierholz et al., 2013), 8.8% of college graduates between the ages of 21-24 years of age face unemployment, and 18.3% of those same graduates face underemployment. Research by the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University (Godofsky, Zukin, & Van Horn, 2011) found in its survey of 22-29 year old college graduates that, among those who are employed, 51% were employed full time. Another 26% reported working part-time; however, 40% reported taking a position that required a four-year degree and only 20% saw their present job as part of their career path. The findings of both of these studies paint a less than promising picture for younger college graduates as they face the very real prospect of unemployment or accepting positions that provide little to no return on the investment they made on their education.

In addition to the employment information, student debt was also discussed. The Institute for College Access and Success (2012) found that two-thirds of college students carry some student loan debt, and the average loan balance carried by college graduates has risen to \$26,600. The instructor explained that this debt is very difficult to get discharged even in instances of bankruptcy; and that in almost 20% of the cases, graduates took positions they could likely have accepted four years earlier directly out of high school without any debt. Presenting this research to the students was used to engage them in discussions about their job prospects and actions that could be taken to seek advantages when entering the job market.

In step two, students were made aware of research regarding the job market and were then asked to identify ways they believed open positions are filled. Answers generally centered on good grades, extracurricular activities, using the alumni network, and knowing others in the field. The instructor provided findings from research conducted by CareerXRoads that revealed that while 42% of all positions are filled internally, the number one method for filling open

positions with external candidates was through referrals (Crispin & Mehler, 2013). Referrals accounted for 24.5% of selection, so the instructor asked students to identify areas from which these referrals might originate. The most common network path mentioned was through university alumni. Students understood that such opportunities existed and even indicated a rudimentary understanding of how relationships could be effective tools for gaining employment.

In step three, once the concept of professional networking was introduced as an integral aspect of employment attainment for external candidates, the instructor led a discussion on the concept of six degrees of separation. To do so, the instructor explained Frigyes Karinthy's (1929) notion of human interconnectedness and how that evolved into the concept of six degrees of separation. This concept was eventually tested in Stanley Milgram's Small World Problem (1967) study where he found the average number of intermediate relationships connecting any two random individuals in the study to be only five. More recently a study of Facebook "friend" connections found that all friends on Facebook are connected by an average of 4.74 relationships (Backstrom, Boldi, Rosa, Ugander, & Vigna, 2011). The notion of degrees of separation was used to show the students how they were likely connected to people within their chosen field and how a network can grow exponentially.

Ultimately all of the statistics were presented to establish the relevance of networking skills as a means to motivate students to engage in the process. Finding ways to make coursework relevant is an ongoing quest for content ranging from math (Stone, Alfeld, & Pearson, 2008) to science (Jenkins, 2011), and professional networking is no different. Students need to see the value of learning networking skills and how professional networking relates to them personally. The assignment was designed to assist in both the development of the

networking skills and the creation of an initial set of contacts the students could use when their job search began.

In step four students were allowed to choose one of two assignments to complete. This phase was the concrete experiment one where the students were required to directly establish contact with a professional in their field or identify individuals who could lead them to a professional in their field. The first option was to start contacting first degree relationships (defined as anyone who knew the student on a first name basis) and asking those first degree relationships who they knew in the student's chosen career field. For example, if the student were a marketing major, he/she would ask his/her first degree relationships for names and contact information for anyone the contact knew who worked in the field of marketing. If the first degree contact did not know anyone in the student's chosen field, the student would ask for someone the first degree contact knew who might know someone in the chosen field. The student would email or call the second degree relationships and map each of them, even if not in the student's field, in an Excel spreadsheet. A truncated example of a contact map is provided in Figure 1.

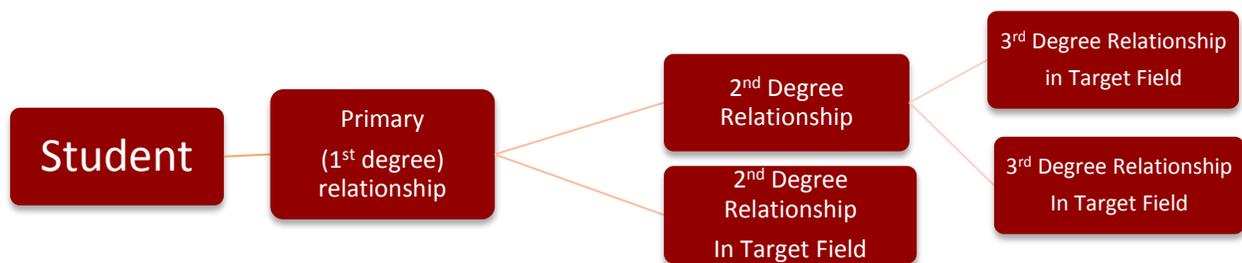


Figure 1 Example of a truncated contact map.

The second assignment option required the students to choose someone highly influential in their major field or in any industry who may be beneficial in assisting them in their career pursuits. This individual may be a high-powered political figure or corporate executives such as

Barack Obama or Bill Gates. The students were not restricted on who they chose, but the potential contact had to be someone relevant to their career and not a first degree relationship. Once the students had chosen the target contact, they were then required to begin contacting their first degree relationships, using those first degree relationships to gather contacts that might know the target person, and determining how many degrees separated them from the target person. As with the first assignment option, the students were required to contact and track all intermediate contacts that led them to their target contact. A visual example of the assignment is provided in Figure 2.

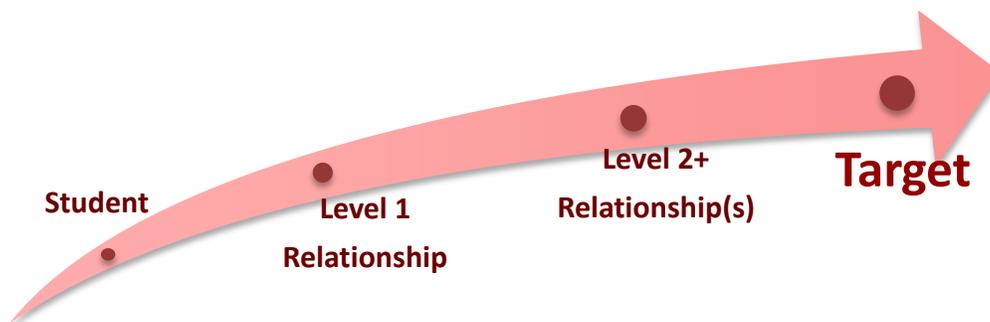


Figure 2 Student to Target Contact Diagram.

Regardless of the option they chose, the students were given approximately 10 weeks to complete the “experience” phase and; the product at the end of this phase was a written assignment. The assignment prompted the students to reflect on the process of the “experience” and respond to three simple questions: what went well with their networking process, what challenges did they encounter in establishing professional connections, and what might they change about the process of establishing networks within their fields

In step five, all students were emailed the survey two weeks after the conclusion of the semester. Because the instructor was not privy to the students who had agreed to participate, the survey was sent to all students who were then asked to complete it if they agreed to participate in

the study. The responses were analyzed to see what new knowledge and concepts were learned about their field and if any changes occurred in their perception about and attitudes towards preparing to transition into the world of work.

Findings

At the end of the semester, the data (in the form of responses to the survey and the student reflection papers) were analyzed qualitatively. At this stage, meaningful units of data were identified and descriptive labels added to them. Once the individual open coding of the data was completed, the codes were compared and similarities identified (Boeije, 2010). The open codes and units of data attached to them were compiled and connections among the initial codes were sought. When the initial codes were categorized based on similarities, they were moved from descriptive labels to interpretive labels, some of which were informed by the literature in the field and the social capital theory. Once this stage of axial or analytical coding was completed, patterns across the categories were sought.

The responses of the students emphasized the learning that had taken place as part of the process of building a professional network. Four main themes emerged from the data. Students had learned about (a) career realities, (b) the process of building a network, (c) challenges in making connections with people, and (d) gains or benefits of establishing professional connections. The following sections elaborate on each of these themes and the first names used are not the actual names of the participants.

Career Realities

Students who took the survey and/or wrote a short piece about their experience in building a professional network for themselves seemed to have gained a better understanding of the reality of the job market, the process of job search, and the possible means of entry and

growth within an industry of their choice. The students in the Business Communication class realized that achieving their career goals was going to take time and effort and it certainly was not going to be a one-step process after graduation. “There isn’t a direct ladder you can climb to get to the top...In agriculture and specifically in John Deere to get to the top, you have to be part of almost every department along the way for a long time” (Ellen). Adam added, “It may take little longer to reach my career goals than I wanted... Hard hours...lot of paper work...but possibilities of advancement.” Students learned that the time frame they had in mind to reach their career goals was not very realistic, and that they needed to adjust their time frames based on the entry and growth process of the industry in which they were seeking employment.

The conversations students had with actual employees about the process of entry and growth within their fields helped them internalize the reality of their field. Given the state of the economy, they felt that they had to compete with many more candidates than they had imagined. What seemed to have struck home was the reality that the participating students understood that they were not only competing with fresh graduates like themselves but also were competing for the same positions with individuals with work experience who were seeking to re-enter the job market or to switch careers, or who were seeking opportunities to advance in their careers. “It’s a very competitive job market. There is a lot of experienced, hard-working, competent people out there that are after the same thing as you are” (Adam). The students felt that with the nature of competition they had to face, they could take no short-cuts to reach their career goals and establishing a professional network was a means to ensure that more doors opened for them. “I have yet to receive a job that was not because of a recommendation and I believe that is most likely how I will be hired in the future” (Helen).

The networking assignment appeared to establish the importance of building connections within the industry, learning about the field and career opportunities, and also becoming visible to the people who could possibly provide them with a referral. More importantly, the assignment taught the students the importance of becoming a known or a familiar face among the pile of nameless candidates applying for positions in response to a job advertisement.

Process of Building a Professional Network

To some extent, the networking assignment compelled the students to contemplate their career goals. In order to establish a professional network, the students first had to identify a field they were interested in or in which they would want to work, as well as the organization where they would like to be employed. So they had to focus on their career, even while at college. Like Nancy, who felt that “I really need to start thinking about what I want to do and about the people that can help me get there,” many others also had spent or wanted to spend time considering their career goals.

The process of establishing networks was not easy for many students, especially those who were generally shy or introverted. Most of the respondents stated that initially they had been apprehensive about approaching people they did not know or even talking to people they knew about their own career interests. Some had to overcome their pride to ask for help through emails, especially from people they did not really know very well, or who were beyond their circle of acquaintances. Many had not been sure of the responses they would get. However, like Nancy who said, “I didn’t expect for people to be so willing to help,” most of them expressed a sense of surprise about the helpfulness of their contacts. The helpfulness of the individuals the students contacted allayed their anxiety about networking to an extent and gave some of them the confidence to reach out to more people.

In the process of seeking referrals, students realized that establishing professional connections was more important than just winning referrals for the sake of the assignment. Donald stated, “I would like to build a relationship instead of just trying to find the next referral”. Therefore, students willingly sought opportunities to establish these professional connections in order to gain more information and advice on their career trajectories. Andy, said, “I asked him who his supervisors are and if I could get in touch with them and see if they could give me some advice on how to reach my career goals.”

By doing so, students were achieving multiple goals like gathering inside information about their industry, making themselves familiar to people in hiring positions, and establishing contacts with people who could lead them to people or positions of interest. Most importantly, the networking assignment helped the students see everyone around them as a potential resource from whom to seek support with regard to their career.

Challenges in Making Connections

Students shared the challenges they faced in getting referrals or establishing professional connections within their industry. One of the major challenges was the lack of goal clarity. Many were in a four-year degree program and were going through their courses without much thought about their careers. In a way, the networking assignment forced them to think beyond college. “I had to decide two things; the first was what my actual goal was. What did I want to ultimately end up with? What job was I seeking?” (Nancy). Not having adequate insight about their preferred careers or knowledge about their field, they could not determine who would be able to help them in gaining access to their chosen field.

Secondly, even though the students could establish social connections with ease, they were not use to building professional networks, and doing it consciously. Therefore, lack of

experience with professional networking rendered the process formidable for most of them. The process was more daunting to students who did not have a large circle of contacts personally or who were from families who did not possess contacts in professional circles. “I never had any prior experience with networking, and having to figure out who I could ask to give me references was difficult because my close personal connects (sic) are pretty much nonexistent” (Nancy).

Moreover, as many students stated, asking for help was not easy. Helen remarked, “I was reluctant to start this e-mail referral request because I find it difficult to ask for help...I was uneasy about asking for referrals.” The faceless mode of communication that the email allowed made it doubly difficult for the students to make that first contact. Some equated it to making cold calls to people or companies.

The students became aware that in the process of establishing contacts and talking to professionals in the industry, they were making an impression on these individuals. “Some people do not realize the impact that you can leave on someone if you impress them, that they could help you out somewhere along the way” (Ellen).

Some students were concerned about making a positive impression within the industry. They were anxious about being prepared for a conversation and asking the right questions, or simply not burning the bridges. The actuality of making an impression in the process of establishing contact was nerve-wracking to some students.

Gains or Benefits of Establishing Professional Connections

Even though the students expressed their challenges and their initial concerns about the networking assignment, their responses also indicated that each one of them gained something specific from the activity based on what they were looking for and where in the program they were. For some, like Andy, the assignment clarified their career goals and the process of the

search. “What I really found interesting with this project was seeing what could be my future laid out in front of me” (Andy).

The process of networking helped clear up some of the myths about the employment scenario and helped students learn the reality first hand. For some who had been reluctant to begin with and had been unsure of the responses, the process had given them confidence in approaching people.

With the positive responses from their initial contacts, some ventured to gain additional referrals in their fields. “All in all my results were very good and I branched out at least [two] degrees if not three in some areas” (Ellen).

Being able to make contacts within professional circles in even a small a way emphasized the possibility of making professional connections for students like Nancy, who felt the network available to them by virtue of their families was very limited. The networking activity taught them that they could start building their own professional network for the future and showed them some methods to do so.

Some students who were not looking for jobs at the time of the assignment were in fact amazed that they found summer positions or internships in the process of completing the assignment. Nancy stated that, “I might even have summer employment due to the connections I made by doing this assignment.” For students with limited professional contacts, the activity was a great step forward towards not just thinking about their careers but actually getting themselves some actual work experience. The assignment presented them with the possibility of gaining experiential knowledge and also gaining entry into organizations they might want to work with after college. Most importantly, for some students the networking assignment seemed to have opened avenues they were not aware existed prior to starting the activity.

The process of talking to people and making connections gave students interesting leads and made exploring career opportunities they had not considered before possible for them. “I had some interesting third degree referrals, sending me all the way to the NASA education department. This caused me to contemplate different teaching career paths rather than just a typical school classroom” (Helen). The fact that their contacts led them to previously unknown opportunities also doubled their faith in the power of networking.

In addition to getting students to start thinking about careers, summer jobs, and interesting avenues, the networking assignment also led a few students towards actual positions. “I now have two possible positions from just thinking about a job and asking my aunt if she knew of any employment opportunities” (Nancy).

The ease with which connections could create opportunities established the significance of networking to students. Even those who began the assignment with anxiety about the process and uncertainty about the outcomes were convinced that networking was clearly a means to finding a job, especially in the face of relentless competition and the supply of graduates exceeding the necessary demand.

Summary

The purpose of the study was to determine how the experience of establishing contact with professionals in their preferred field would impact the career attitudes and preparation of college students. The described activity created a learning opportunity for students to engage in professional networking and investigate their reactions to the process. The reactions centered on what the students learned regarding career realities; the process of building a network; challenges in making connections with people; and gains or benefits of establishing professional connections.

Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

While the overall student responses to the study were positive certain areas for future research were identified, and alterations to the methodology may prove beneficial regarding student takeaway. As this was a pilot study, the researcher had students write a paper on their experience; however, future research may consider using a systematized format to capture student reactions with a quantitative measure to gauge changes in levels of variables such as self-efficacy, locus of control, and confidence. A longitudinal study on how the contacts that the students developed through this activity were utilized over time or how these contacts translated into career opportunities may be merited and could also measure the growth of the network over time.

In this instructional method, students were given significant latitude in investigating and mapping their network. This quasi-heutagogical approach (Hase & Kenyon, 2000) was intended to give students the freedom to dig into the process unfettered and self-directed. Such an approach may have created opportunities for self-determined learning, but it also may have hindered the students' ability to begin the process with some degree of confidence. To help students avoid undue stress, future researchers may choose to include coursework and activities similar to those used by de Janasz and Forret (2008), Segrist and Pawlow (2009), and Kryder (2011) prior to sending students off on their own to make contact with potential network members to avoid undue nervousness or stress.

This application-based method is extremely relevant for CTE due to the pragmatic perspective of educators in those fields. The emphasis on experiential learning and transfer of skills to the workplace extends to soft skills such as professional networking. Students in such

programs may be more responsive to such a method because they are familiar and comfortable with learning through real-life application as emphasized in CTE related programs.

Ultimately, educators want their students to succeed and doing so means providing students with both job specific knowledge and general skills to navigate their professional landscape. This study addressed professional networking as one such skill to help students gain entry into and advance their career. The experience seemed to benefit the participants based on their responses, but more systematic research is needed to hone the method for optimal learning and application.

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