VICARIOUS LEARNING THROUGH INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS: A NEW EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING TOOL

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Many students find it difficult to transition into the workforce successfully. They often accept unsuitable positions through happenstance rather than actively planning their career trajectories. This is due to their unawareness of career exploration and mapping. We use informational interviewing as an in class experiential learning assignment to solve this problem. The assignment gives students the opportunity to source information from industry experts and expand their professional network. It helps students develop their professional presence, find careers of interest, and ultimately succeed in their transition into the workforce.

It is no surprise that the job market for postsecondary graduates is highly competitive. Only 10% of PhD students will enter tenure track positions meaning most of these highly qualified individuals will not find work in academia. With the number of tenure track positions remaining constant and the number of graduate students doubling, especially in physical and life science fields, it is hardly surprising that graduates are embracing alternate career choices (Reithmeier et al., 2019). Many graduate students are then confronted with the task of pivoting and moving into public and private sectors with little guidance on how to successfully make this transition. Undergraduates finishing their degrees face a similar challenge when transitioning into the workforce (Greenbank, 2014).

We have been using informational interviews (IIs) as an in class experiential learning assignment for both graduate (biomedical engineers) and undergraduate (third- and fourth-year health sciences) courses over the past four years. This assignment is geared toward helping address the professional skills awareness gap while encouraging career exploration. We believe that higher education is best served when students pursue wayfinding in parallel with learning.

IIs are essentially a conversation with a professional. The professional can serve as a model upon which students can base their future work selves. The interviews are purely to gather information and ask for career advice; they are not a request for a job. These interviews allow students to gain first-hand knowledge of what a position truly requires. Students essentially learn vicariously through the experiences of others (Crosby, 2010; Fiske, 2016). This process encourages students to critically analyze their future self. This helps the student envision how they would fit into their role of interest. This makes IIs both an excellent learning approach and a highly effective career exploration tool. Too often, students postpone career exploration and networking until it is too late. This is why we make students perform IIs as part of a course requirement.

In this paper we argue that an II assignment is a unique experiential learning tool that can help students learn to rapidly prototype potential careers and develop the essential skills required for effective career mapping and exploration.

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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Experiential learning is the process of constructing meaning and understanding from a real-life experience. The foundations for the "learn by doing" framework was established in the 20th century by John Dewey and was later refined by David Kolb (1984). Dewey highlighted the idea that learning and reflection occurs when our normal flow of experiences is disrupted. These deep experiences can occur when we are "stuck" on a problem or when an experience contradicts our preconceived thoughts and opinions (Dewey, 1938). The II assignment is an excellent experiential learning tool as it is designed to help students reflect on their preconceived notions of a particular career path.

Kolb (1984) outlined an experiential learning model as a cyclical process consisting of four main elements namely: experiencing, reflecting, abstract conceptualization (thinking) and active experimentation (acting). It is possible to enter this model at any stage but effective learning will only occur if the student can complete all four stages (A. Kolb & Kolb, 2018; D. Kolb, 1984; McLeod, 2017). The II assignment we outline here ensures students complete this cycle and ensures students actively engaged in learning about career exploration (Atkinson Jr & Murrell, 1988). Kolb (1974) also detailed various learning styles and explained that individuals have a preference for a particular style. There are two axes, namely the Processing Continuum (how we approach a task by watching or doing) and Perception Continuum (the emotional response either thinking or feeling).

The process of completing an II assignment engages all learning styles as students procced through the process of abstract conceptualization (lectures on informational interviewing), active experimentation (planning the interview and researching a career), concrete experience (conducting the interview) and reflective observation (student presentations and group discussions).

Teaching this assignment requires a dynamic matching of teaching role to the phase of the experiential learning process. During the thinking phase we act as subject experts providing information on various aspects of the II process from how to contact a professional to the etiquette during the interview. In the active experimentation phase, we act as a coach helping students identify potential careers that align with their interests and life goals. During the reflection phase educators balance the role of facilitators and evaluators (A. Kolb & Kolb, 2018). We evaluate the presentations to help students make meaning of their own experience, but we also facilitate class discussions and questions to help learners reflect on their experience.

The goal of implementing an II assignment is to provide students with the opportunity to gain first-hand experience of a particular career but more importantly learn a life skill that helps them proactively and continuously map their careers. The II assignment aligns with Kolb's (1984) model in that it is an endless and recurring spiral of lifelong learning.

Adaptability and Soft Skill Development

Linear career progression is fast becoming a thing of the past and this is forcing people to change occupations more often (Cabras & Mondo, 2018). This means that individuals require a new skill set to help them adapt and pivot throughout their careers. Attitude, abilities and behaviors that enable individuals to adapt and find a satisfactory job should be taught to students to better equip them for an unstable labor market (Cabras & Mondo, 2018). To accomplish this, students need to be taught how to proactively explore careers. The core skills necessary for effective career exploration include forward-thinking, planning, researching, goal setting and decision making (Decarie, 2010).

Proactive career exploration essentially requires students to investigate and reflect on potential careers. The idea of a work-self or future-self can help broaden an individual's aspirations. This self-reflection on career aspirations also promotes creative thinking around career possibilities and

helps generate plans and goals to makes the aspirations a reality. There is evidence to show that students who are confident in their career adaptability have higher life satisfaction because they are confident about their prospects (Cabras & Mondo, 2018). Students who are self-reflective and have detailed thoughts about their future careers are better able to respond to information that threatens their future work-self and manoeuver to overcome these challenges. When students have a better idea of what they want to do in the future they are more motivated to work to achieve their career goals (Strauss, Griffin, & Parker, 2012). This is includes developing skills that are not required for their current position or gaining extracurricular experiences that promote career advancement (Stevenson & Clegg, 2011).

Development of professional skills (often associated with career exploration) is an area that is neglected during a student's degree program (both at undergraduate and graduate levels), yet these skills are critical for employment and career success. The top skills employers desire in new hires include communication, work ethic, teamwork, self-management, project management and leadership (Orr, Sherony, & Steinhaus, 2011). While students recognize the importance of having core field knowledge and technical skills to be competitive, most are unaware of the importance of professional skills in the workplace, and how they are practicing them in university (Decarie, 2010). This professional skills "awareness" gap explains why the non-academic workplace is largely disappointed with graduates (Jackson, 2010). Systems need to be implemented in post-secondary education to help students present their unique value proposition to hiring managers, one that does not solely rest on technical expertise.

Bridging the Professional Skills Awareness Gap

As an experiential learning approach, IIs help students develop their professional persona. They promote the use of professional skills such as confidence, communication (both written and verbal), information management, problem-solving, critical thinking, responsibility, positive attitude, adaptability, the ability to set and keep deadlines and risk management (Decarie, 2010). Through iteration, IIs provide students the opportunity to practice these skills and learn by doing. By exploring new potential career paths and investigating new career models students learn the art of the career pivot and find ways to apply their skills in different contexts students learn wayfinding, a way to plan career trajectories that are best suited to an individual. Many career paths fail to meet a student's preconceived notions about a position. By continuously investigating alternate career paths students build resilience to these micro-failures, which enables rational decision-making on career choice.

IIs are appropriate for any level of adult learner in post-secondary education from first-year students to post-doctoral fellows. It is a life skill that can be used at any stage of an individual's career (Decarie, 2010). IIs provide students, particularly young adults, with a structured approach to talking to superiors and seeking advice. This process helps them identify role models and, in many cases, leads to mentor-protégé relationships. They also provide a means of establishing a professional network, which is essential for uncovering the hidden job market (where positions are not advertised but rather filled by referral (O'Brien, 2015)). In addition, having a broad professional network exposes students to these positions and increases the likelihood that they are considered as candidates for these unadvertised opportunities.

Why IIs Need to be Integrated into the Syllabus

IIs provide an excellent opportunity for students to improve their professional development, however, approaching a stranger is a daunting task. Many students will not conduct these interviews independently. Students may fear that by asking for help they will appear incompetent when in fact the opposite is true (Yukl & Tracey, 1992). Asking for advice with difficult tasks helps promote the

idea that a student is more competent and is one of a few effective tactics that influence the opinions of superiors (Brooks, Gino, & Schweitzer, 2015; Yukl & Tracey, 1992). Students may also fear failure and may be reticent of engaging with professionals. IIs are a great way of building resilience to failure. Conducting II allows the students to develop their professional presence and grow their soft skills. Building self-esteem, confidence and an internal locus of control are the biggest buffers against anxiety relating to failure (Johnson, Panagioti, Bass, Ramsey, & Harrison, 2017).

Many undergraduate students do not use a rational approach to making career decisions; rather intuitive thinking is employed (Greenbank, 2014). Even though they are aware of its importance, students don't engage in career exploration, because they are focused on the day to day activities and deadlines which prevents them from thinking of the future. Additionally, the idea that students have plenty of time to research careers prevents them from actively setting career goals and results in a decreased motivation to explore their career options (Carstensen, 2006; Taber, 2013).

For these reasons, it is critical to integrate this assignment into the curriculum. Including IIs as an assignment helps focus the students' attention on career exploration and provides an environment in which to alleviate many of the fears regarding the interview process. It also provides an opportunity to prepare students for their assignment by giving them additional information and resources during class.

Seeding in Class II Assignments

IIs can be implemented in a myriad of ways depending on the course and how much class time you are willing to devote to the subject. They can be a semester-long assignment with multiple written and oral reports. Lectures on public speaking, training in interpersonal communication, body language, and mock interviews can all be covered before students contact a professional. Alternatively, IIs can be used as a single assignment in the context of a broader course (Decarie, 2010). While we mostly use it for career exploration, we have also begun to explore the utility of IIs in inquiry-based learning and entrepreneurship.

There are numerous approaches to implementing IIs as assignments depending on the course. Some ideas include;
- Conducting at least one interview in a career of the students' choice.
- Using the entire semester to prepare for an interview (role-playing activates, mock interviews, progress reports, 10-15 page written assignment on the interview).
- Conducting team interviews.
- Multiple interviews conducted over a semester in different career paths.
- Using interviews as a larger project researching a particular industry or career.
- Findings can be presented as presentations or written assignments.

We have tried to use a balanced approach to teach IIs, by devoting some class time to preparing the students for their assignment and then allowing the students to prepare their assignments in their own time. We start with a lecture (45 minutes) on Networking and LinkedIn, addressing concerns such as how to use the platform and how to build a professional profile. We even bring in a professional photographer to take their pictures. We also show students how to find contacts within their network during these presentations. We devote a second lecture to describing IIs and the assignment (Appendix 1) for the semester. Here we introduce four main topics that should be covered in the interview namely:
- Qualifications – What are the education and skills required for the position?
- Landscape – What is the job market like? Is it a growing industry or shrinking?

- Personal- How does the position align with personal goals, interests and values?
- Leads- Ask for leads to develop skills or interview another person. Continue the career exploration, it doesn't stop with a single interview.

We spend some time explaining the etiquette of the interview in this lecture; topics ranging from how to dress to sending thank you notes to each professional interviewed are covered. We also help students think about how to go about contacting the professional and using their networks.

We use a third and final lecture to help alleviate the pressure/stress students feel when confronted with an interview. To do this we play the crazy interview game (Appendix 2). This is a game designed to help students think about open-ended questions to include in their interview and helps alleviate stress as the game is designed to help practice interview techniques.

Connecting to Learning Theory

We recognize that conducting these interviews can be stressful for students and try to alleviate this anxiety where possible. This assignment aims to push students out of their *Comfort Zone* and into their *Courage Zone*, where experiential learning occurs best (Senninger, 2000). By providing additional support outside of class and including the crazy interview game we hope to prevent students from entering the *Terror Zone*. The aim is to give students enough confidence to perform the interviews successfully moving them into a courage zone so they can learn and apply new skills (Senninger, 2000).

IIs are also a form of transformational learning (Cranton and Roy, 2003). As most of our students are in the life sciences, from an adult learning perspective, they are exposed to both technical and communicative knowledge (Mezirow, 1991). However, by encouraging them to reflect on and to share their II experience, students encounter emancipatory knowledge (Habermas, 2015), which forms the basis of change.

IIs are also an invaluable tool for teaching adult students as they conform to the learning principles of (Lieb, 1991), Adult learners are also relevancy oriented and have a wealth of life experience. Their learning needs to be connected to their knowledge and experience. They are also goal oriented and focus on objectives and learning outcomes (par 3-5). IIs also connect students with professionals who can give them practical advice on school, life outside of school, and careers that are relevant to the student. Interviews help establish professional networks that can help students find positions and offer insights into how the industry works.

Lieb (1991) also stated that adult learners are autonomous and self-directed. The II assignment caters to this characteristic by allowing students to determine who they will interview and what careers are of interest to them. The presentations given by the students also allow peers to teach each other about careers rather than the instructor guiding class discussions (Decarie, 2010; Lieb, 1991).

CONCLUSION

We believe that II assignments offer a unique solution that can help bridge the skills awareness gap between students and industry. These assignments help students practice and develop their professional skills in a way that is meaningful to them. When IIs are incorporated into a course career exploration suddenly enters a student's hierarchy of needs. This event forces students to think about their future selves promptly, making career exploration a priority. This assignment also prepares students to continually explore career options, making them highly adaptable and future-oriented, enabling them to deal with a highly volatile labor market. The assignment is malleable and

can easily be incorporated into a diverse range of courses. The II assignment is suitable for all levels of postsecondary education ranging from first-year to PhD students. The process is not subject-specific and can be tailored to different industries and sectors. This tool will help students develop their professional presence, find careers of interest to them and ultimately contribute to their successful transition into the workforce.

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APPENDIX

1. The II Assignment

Students are asked to conduct at least one informational interview with a professional in a career of their choice (with the caveat they may not pick a standard tenure track position). We provide resources on alternate careers to ensure students in the class cover a range of different careers related to biotechnology. The students have to interview someone that is not employed by the university and that they have not met before. They may use their personal, classmates or professional networks to secure an interview. If students struggle to find a candidate to interview we provide introductions to professionals. The students have to provide proof of attempted contact with professionals before this is considered. Face-Face interviews are ideal but phone/skype interviews are acceptable. Students must then report back to the class on their given career choice and interview in a 10-minute presentation at the end of the semester.

2. The Crazy Interview Game.

Students are asked to pair up and are given cards with a random career. The students may not let their opponent see what is written on their card. The students are allowed to ask only 10 questions of their partner and the aim of the game is to identify the career. If a close-ended question (question with a yes/no answer) is asked the student may refuse to answer and the interviewer may not ask a replacement question. The students are tasked with figuring out their teammates' occupation.