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From the Classroom to the Boardroom: How Understanding “The Rules” of Dating Can Help Undergraduate Business Students Understand “The Rules” of Effective Career Communication

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This article describes an in-class exercise that has worked to elevate student awareness of the importance of planning verbal and nonverbal behavior as key to successful career communication. Small groups of students answer questions about dating and then apply their understanding from what it takes to make and sustain a positive impression in dating situations to career communication, including networking, co-op, and job interviews.

Key Words: Careers, Impression Management, Interpersonal Attraction, Job Interviewing
Disciplines of Interest: Business Communications, Social Psychology, Human Resources

INTRODUCTION

Daniel Feldman (2003) defines *career insight* as the “degree to which individuals have realistic perceptions of themselves and their environments (p. 501).” He suggests that college students typically lack career insight during the short time period in which they must make important career decisions as they transition from high school to college to full-time work. These decisions include identifying a career goal and activities consistent with that goal, such as choosing a major and extra-curricular activities, then securing career-relevant volunteer work or actual employment in their chosen field.

In short, within one to two years of entering college, students are making – or should be making – critical decisions that will influence the rest of their lives at a time when their “core personalities are not yet fully developed and when they have had little personal experience” (Feldman, p. 500) in understanding how to prepare for important encounters, such as networking meetings and interviews for co-ops, internships, and full-time jobs.

The challenge facing instructors is to create in-

class activities that help students understand what it takes to succeed as they transition from college to the world of work. Muir points out that to succeed in landing a good job or co-op, the most critical step is “the initial job interview . . . where applicants must separate themselves from the rest of the pack.” (p. 156). He continues, “Given the stakes and short time frame, the encounter is usually ambiguous, if not awkward, for applicants since they have to quickly assess the interviewer’s demeanor and size up the behaviors appropriate for the interaction” (p. 156). Significantly, a recent study of initial job interviews (Higgins & Judge, 2004) found that “applicants who focused more on being pleasant, agreeable, and offering compliments to interviewers were deemed better fits to their prospective jobs (and were hired at a higher rate) than applicants who focused more on their credentials for the job.” Surprisingly, effectiveness at ingratiation proved more predictive of job offers than did “academic qualifications or work experience” (Muir, 157). In short, research indicates that to succeed in landing the best jobs, students must learn to make a solid first impression and then sustain that impression in interview and other business situations, when they have had little experience in that

arena.

This article describes the results of an in-class exercise designed to raise awareness of valuing pre-planning for business communication encounters. It 1) describes the objective of the exercise, 2) its pedagogy and methodology, 3) its results and how they are used to stimulate class discussion, and 4) provides an analysis of why the exercise works.

The main objective of this exercise is to raise awareness of the importance to interpersonal and career success of planning for important business communication encounters. The specific objectives involve making and sustaining a positive first impression. Through this exercise, students understand what it takes to succeed as they transition from college to the real world. Students also understand how to prepare for networking events, business meetings and interviews for co-ops, internships, and full-time jobs.

We designed this activity using Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning as a framework. In this model, learners begin with concrete experience that leads them to the next stage, reflective observation. Reflection leads to active experimentation, testing existing concepts, which leads to abstract conceptualization, formulating new ideas that better fit how they now experience the world. Then learning begins again with a new perspective based on past learning.

METHODOLOGY

This exercise, which takes 45-60 minutes to complete, uses simple classroom aids and is most appropriate for undergraduate classes. As a gateway to understanding how to make a positive impression in career communication situations such as networking, co-op, internship, and full-time job interviews, students in small groups answer questions about dating, a topic with which almost all are familiar, from both personal experience and through media portrayals in television shows, movies, and magazines. Subsequently, they draw generalizations about how their collective insights into dating can help them better understand how to plan for, execute, and follow up in networking, job interviewing, and other business interactions.

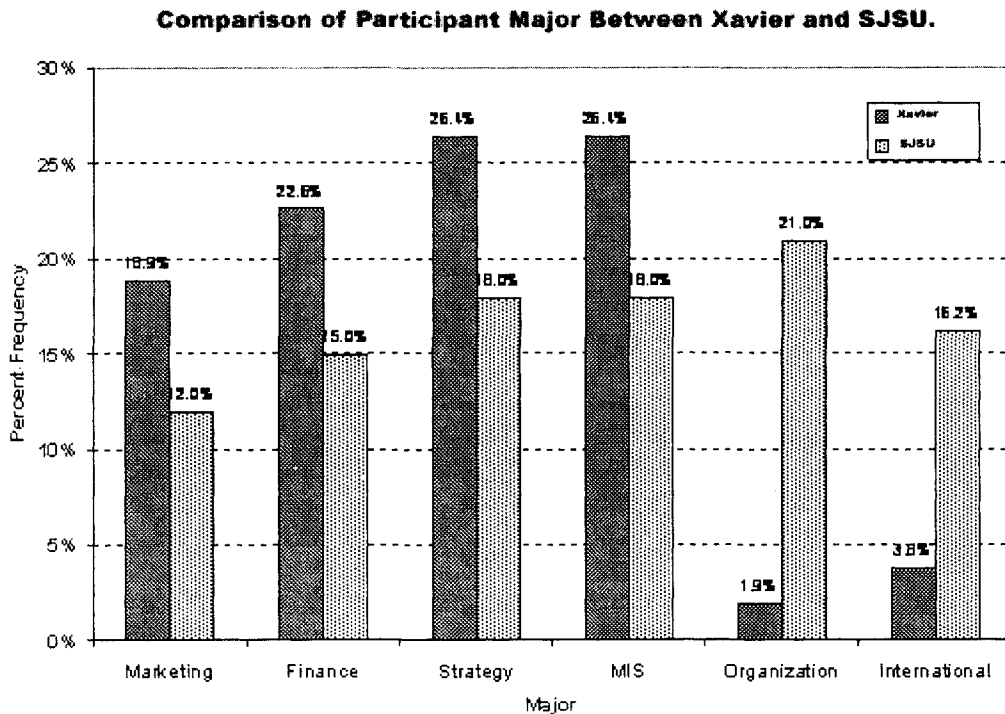
We introduce the exercise by asking students to

think about the feelings they experienced in situations in which they asked another out on a date or were asked out on a date, consistent with Kolb's first step in experiential learning, concrete experience. We point out that when we do not at first know people well, we are often particularly unsure of how to initiate and sustain productive conversation. We then suggest that students, based on their collective personal experience and observation, have an accurate informal knowledge of what good impression management involves—and what its effect is on their ability to achieve goals that depend upon the assent of another person. Students engage in Kolb's second step in experiential learning, reflective observation, by sharing responses and reactions in small groups. Kolb's third step of active experimentation happens in class, where students participate in drawing analogies about the relationship between appropriate dating and job interview etiquette. Finally, we assign a post-class reflective activity in which students are asked to write about how they will translate their learning into more effective initial interviewing practices.

We divide each class into three groups with a minimum of three and a maximum of five students per group. (With larger classes, the same question is assigned to more than one group.) The first pair of questions addresses how to *create* a positive first impression, the second how to *sustain* a positive impression, and the third how to *undermine* a positive impression. Each group takes five minutes to brainstorm answers to one of the three pairs of questions below and compiles its answers to its question on a chart pad. Each group appoints 1) a scribe who writes the group's responses on a chart pad, and 2) a spokesperson who communicates the group's results to the class. Students then identify which items from each list would also apply to networking and interview situations. The scribes tabulate their results and distribute them in the next class session. Subsequent to identifying transferable behaviors, the instructor guides the class in identifying applicable business communication principles for networking, interviewing, and other business communication encounters.

To stimulate retention and application, following the exercise we assign a post-class reflective activity in which students write about how they will translate their learning into more effective initial interviewing

Figure 1. Comparison of Participant Major Between Xavier and SJSU



practices. In the next class we ask student volunteers to read excerpts from their reflective activity and to comment on the value of the exercise in helping present themselves effectively in business and career related situations. This follow-up helps students complete Kolb's cycle of learning, as they gain new perspectives that better fit how they now perceive how to create positive first impressions of themselves in business communication settings. (See Appendix.)

We conducted the exercise and gathered data at two universities: Xavier University, a mid-sized private university in the Midwest, and San Jose State University (SJSU), a large urban public university on the West Coast. Sixty-two Xavier students participated, including 30 men and 32 women; 167 SJSU students participated, including 84 men and 83 women. This exercise was implemented as part of a required upper-division Business Communication class. Participation had no impact on grades.

We completed a content analysis in collaboration with two students, a graduate student and an undergraduate student, who did not participate in the exercise. Our team examined the data student groups submitted to determine what students most frequently agreed were appropriate and inappropriate dating behaviors. We tabulated answers and established a parsimonious set of categories into which student comments fell.

Questions on Presenting Oneself to the Other

Group 1 *How would the ideal date, whom you did not know well, communicate verbally and nonverbally to encourage you to agree to a date? How would you communicate verbally and nonverbally to get someone you did not know well to ask you out on a first date?*

Group 2 *How would the ideal date communicate*

verbally and nonverbally during the first date to encourage you to accept an offer of a second date? How would you communicate verbally and nonverbally during and after a first date to encourage your date to ask you out on a second date?

Group 3 *What verbal and nonverbal behaviors, including behaviors that did not happen, would dissuade you from accepting a first date? What verbal and nonverbal behaviors, including behaviors that did not happen during or after the date, would dissuade you from accepting a second date?*

RESULTS

Results indicate that students have remarkably similar responses to the questions. They successfully generalized from their personal experience with dating to a broader understanding and acceptance of planning situationally appropriate business communication and career development behaviors. Results of student conclusions about which courtship behaviors are also appropriate and inappropriate in business communication encounters are summarized in the tables below.

What Students Learn

Class discussion reinforces the conclusion that parallels exist between effective communication in a romantic courtship and in an employer "courtship" relationship. As a class, we typically identify five principles that can be generalized from the dating exercise to networking and job interviewing, as well as a series of specific guidelines that flow from them. Most follow Lloyd Bitzer's (1968) analysis of the rhetorical situation: that students need to simultaneously communicate in terms of their goals, their audience's needs, and the demands of the situation. Specifically, as a class we conclude effective business communicators

- 1) Plan their communication behaviors in terms of their objectives.
- 2) Adapt their communication to their goals and to their audience.
- 3) Stress similarities with their audiences and speak in positive language.

- 4) Adapt their communication to the demands of the situation.
- 5) Sustain planned, audience-centered communication practices throughout their business careers.

As faculty, we provide evidence from academic sources to demonstrate to students that a factual basis exists for the connections they are making between effective dating and business communication strategies. Below, we highlight key points of our typical class discussions.

Principles and Applications

Principle 1: Effective Business Communicators Plan Their Communication Behaviors in Terms of Their Objectives.

They understand that the content of a communication and the context in which it is presented is planned to establish the credibility of the communicators. They set goals, analyze the audience and the situation, and plan their verbal and nonverbal behavior to specifically achieve these goals.

As an application, we point out that similar to asking a person they did not know well for a date, students who want to network with professionals in their field should go to places where these experts meet, such as professional associations. As in dating, they should develop a strategy to gain favorable attention, such as arriving early at the meeting; identifying one or two potential contacts; and having a politeness strategy for introducing themselves to the contacts, followed by a small talk and questioning strategy that encourages contacts to talk positively about their careers and achievements.

After respectful listening—a gift to contacts—the student can ask for a simple favor in return, such as reviewing a resume, recommending other contacts from whom the student could gain further insight, or making an appointment for an informational interview to discuss which courses and co-ops would best prepare the student for a particular line of work.

Students also emphasize an increased understanding of the importance of making a good first

Table 1. Student conclusions about standards of good business communication based on their analysis of appropriate and inappropriate dating behavior

Non-Verbal	Appropriate business communication behavior	Inappropriate business communication behavior
Timeliness	On time	Late
Appearance & grooming	Neat, clean, well-dressed and groomed, good posture, open posture	Sloppily dressed and groomed, poor posture Too much make-up, perfume, and jewelry. Large, visible tattoos. Body odor
Handshake	Appropriate handshake, firm and of appropriate length	Squeezing, pumping, dead fish, or two handed handshake—too short or too long
Listening	Stays focused, leans forward to demonstrate high level of interest. Avoids interruptions.	Interrupts, dominates conversation, listens without responding verbally or nonverbally
Facial expression	Smiling, direct eye communication	Too serious, stares or does not establish consistent eye communication
Tone	Warm, friendly tone of voice	Arrogant, indifferent, or unfriendly tone of voice
Proximity	Goes places where networking target will be, such as company gym, professional associations, and job fairs. Stands neither too close nor too far.	Does not seek out opportunities to be in same place as networking target. Stands too close or too far.
Manners	Shows consideration for others, e. g., turns off cell phone, opens doors when appropriate	Self-centered, does not anticipate situations and respond courteously to others. Interrupts interview by answering cell phone
Formality	Appropriate to situation	Inappropriate to situation, too informal or too formal
Maturity	Picks topics of mutual and relevant interest. Steers clear of conflict, avoids talking about other companies, job offers	Argumentative. Debates issues. Focuses on topics of self interest rather than mutual interest. Talks about other companies, job offers
Manners	Politeness strategy: Treats contact and others, such as servers, well. No arguing or debating. Does not exhibit rude behaviors.	Lacks courtesy toward interviewer and others. Exhibits rude behavior: smoking, spitting, burping, yawning, sighing, talking too loudly, chewing with mouth open, inebriation.
Small talk	Upbeat, light, noncontroversial	Negative, gossipy, backbiting, controversial
Ingratiation	Strategy to gain favorable attention: Indicates how they know of the job. Highlights common ground. Compliments interviewer & interviewer's organization. Sincerely promotes positives about self as a differentiation strategy.	Does not have strategy to create positive first impression Knows little about interviewer or company. Does not demonstrate shared interests. Does not promote self positively. Does not compliment interviewer or company.
Questioning	Asks questions that allow other to speak positively about self and organization. Asks questions about job & organization.	Asks inappropriate questions. Speaks negatively about interviewer or organization. Asks questions that indicate more interest in benefits to self rather than in benefiting the networking target or the company.
Positive Demeanor	Relaxed, sense of humor, clean language. Uses a positive vocabulary.	Tense, overly serious, sarcastic, apologetic, boastful. Uses of negative, obscene, sexist, or racist language
Consideration	Confirms details prior to meeting, indicates he or she is looking forward to it	Does not call to confirm; does not indicate enthusiasm for event
Correctness	Knows spelling, pronunciation of names	Incorrect spelling, pronunciation of names and companies
Completeness of responses	Complete answers, responsive to concerns of others	Incomplete answers, may be too brief or unresponsive to intent of questions
Next steps Follow through	Indicates meeting was a valuable experience. Exchanges information, jointly agrees on next steps. Confidently asks for referral or for the position. Says will follow up via phone, mail, or email, and does.	Leaves without indicating experience was positive. Does not plan for follow up during meeting or subsequently. Does not communicate subsequent to meeting.

first impression in business communication situations. (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997; Gilmore & Ferris, 1989; Kacmar, Delery, & Ferris, 1992; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Rosenfeld, Giacalone, & Riordan, 1995; Schenkler, 1980; Stevens & Kristof, 1995). We cite evidence that impressions formed during the first five-minutes of the interview are seldom changed during the next 30 to 60 minutes (Wyche, 2002; Dougherty et al., 1994). For example, as in dating, how carefully applicants groom, dress (e.g., wearing a nice outfit), and how they project themselves non-verbally including their gestures and expressions send a message about the value of the encounter. Similarly, effective eye contact conveys an image of confident and competent communication. Proper handshaking, head nodding and smiling, positive initial small talk, and other conventional courtesies are important to demonstrate a sincere interest in the interviewer (Huegli and Tschirgi, 1974) and will likely improve interviewers' evaluations of the applicants' qualifications (Kristof-Brown, 2002).

Conversely, as with dating, a fairly universal set of behaviors and attributes typically lead to negative impressions. These include body odor; bad breath; sloppy grooming; poor posture; too much perfume, make-up or jewelry; big tattoos; reckless driving, smoking or getting drunk; and answering a cell phone during a meeting or conversation.

Principle 2: Effective Business Communicators Adapt Their Communication to Their Goals and to Their Audience.

We show that communication is a reciprocal process in which we adapt our communication to our perceptions of how others will--or are--communicating with us, and that a mutual evaluation process occurs, which affects current and future interactions with that person. Consequently, good communicators develop a dual perspective, recognizing both their own needs and those of others. Developing a dual perspective requires two talents: 1) the ability to practice "mental rehearsal"—looking at oneself through the eyes of others and considering what we could do to meet and exceed their expectations, and 2) paying close attention to feedback, as a reality test of initial perceptions (Phillips and Metzger, 1976).

We point out that relationships remain viable

only if each person perceives that what is being received is more valuable than what is being given (Hunt & Tourish 2000). For example, we point to evidence from the dating exercise that just as one should plan a date that meets the needs of both parties, when networkers gain information from a contact, they should give the contact something in exchange, such as offering to pay for a breakfast meeting that does not interfere with the contact's work schedule, indicating appreciation for the time the contact took to do the interview, and sending a follow up thank you note or email, and saying something positive about the contact to the person who originally referred him or her to the networker.

Principle 3: Effective Business Communicators Stress Similarities with Their Audiences and Speak in Positive Language.

We stress the relevance of the similarity principle, which suggests that people feel most comfortable around people they perceive to be like themselves—and welcome communication with people who show a sincere interest in them. Just as they would behave on a date, students agree effective networkers develop a plan to demonstrate common ground. This would include researching the company before an interview so the interviewee can talk confidently about the company's products and services, history and major competitors, all of which can aid in the initial small talk (Koonce, 1997).

We point out that as most people prefer to associate with positive people, students should incorporate that "positive attitude" into their interaction with their contact (Wyche, 2002). This would include offering honest compliments about interviewers, including mentioning the interviewer's name and expressing interpersonal attraction (Ralston and Kirkwood, 1999) and complimenting their companies (Backhaus, 2004); asking questions to find out the other's needs and expectations; staying focused on the other while holding up their end of the conversation, and avoiding negative language, especially about the company or an aspect of their visit.

We also point out that part of effective career communication is positive self promotion. We suggest students develop a differentiation strategy so they can

highlight talents that are most important to their target audience (Scott, 2003), communicating clearly to their employers what unique value they add to the company. We cite Kristof-Brown et al. (2002), "Previous studies have found that final interview outcomes are more strongly related to self-focused tactics than any other type of impression management. Our results suggest that self-promoting behaviors such as describing one's skills and experiences in a positive light and underscoring how one's own characteristics and competencies match the demands and requirements of the work context may lead interviewers to see the applicant as a good fit with the job (p 41.)"

Principle 4: Effective Business Communicators Adapt their Communication to the Demands of the Situation.

We identify four situational guidelines.

Behave with appropriate formality. We agree that, as with an initial and subsequent date, the level of formality in business communications must be matched to the communication context. Many hiring managers deplore the casual attitude of today's twenty-something generation, complaining that many demonstrate an "inability to move from the informal to the formal" (Koeppel, 2002). This includes formality of dress, diction, and address. For example, we conclude one should only use an interviewer's first name after finding out how the interviewer prefers to be addressed and what his or her title or role is. We also agree that most people favor those who communicate in the middle of potential extremes: preferring a person to be confident, rather than arrogant or timid; relaxed, rather than tense or indifferent; with an appropriate sense of humor, rather than a too serious demeanor or the use of sarcasm, profanity or humor with sexist, racist, or other discriminatory overtones. Most people also prefer others who maintain an appropriate personal space, neither too close nor too far.

Communicate with the right tone. Students conclude that, as in dating, an appropriate tone is typically warm and friendly, without condescension, excessive reserve or informality. The speaker is positive toward self and others without arguing,

debating, excessive apologizing or boasting.

Show good table manners and personal habits. We agree that smoking, spitting, burping, chewing with an open mouth, excessive touching, yawning, fidgeting, sighing, or talking loudly are among the behaviors to be avoided in both romantic and business encounters. We conclude that exhibiting annoying behaviors while communicating with others will reduce the likelihood that the message will be received (Horowitz, 2004).

Treat others courteously such as servers, taxi drivers, and administrators. We highlight attribution theory which describes the processes by which people explain events and the real life consequences of those explanations. We point out that research suggests that when people see an act or hear a story about an actor, they initially make personality attributions to the actor and start mentally cataloging that person by that label, indicating that people judge others both by how they are treated and by how they see and hear job candidates have treated others (Kelley, 1973; McKee, 2003).

Principle 5: Effective Business Communicators Maintain and Sustain Planned, Audience-Centered Communication Practices throughout Their Careers.

We stress it is important to create positive first impressions because they have a strong influence on the potential for future relationships. Just as in dating, where the first encounter may affect the desire to continue dating, in a job interview, the first interview strongly affects the candidate's potential of obtaining a position. Sunnafrank (2004) conducted a study in which the initial encounter of students was compared to the nature of their relationship nine weeks later. He reports that perceptions shaped during initial discussions influenced relationships throughout that time.

We cite Andrea Nierenberg (1999), "people remember what they see and hear from you. Always make a good first impression, and keep it that way. The reason a company keeps its long-term customers is because of consistency. The same is true for you. Whatever you did to make a good first impression (such as sending a note, following up quickly, having a cheerful attitude), make sure you continue to demonstrate those positive attributes (p. 52)."

Figure 2. Representative Student Comments

Students enthusiastically shared how participating in the exercise impacted them both personally and professionally. The verbatims below are drawn from three sources: comments recorded during class discussion; comments provided on an index card at the end of the class; and comments expressed in the written reflection handed in during a subsequent class.

1. This was my lucky day! I learned about how dating and interviewing are related. Now I know what to do the next time I interview for a job. Knowing what to do can help me land on a job.
2. This exercise brought a lot of energy to the classroom during a cold November day. Students got excited about learning!
3. Dating and job interviewing is something I would never link together. At first, I felt like 'Aha' and then, it became like 'interesting'. I later I asked myself, why I haven't I thought about this (dating and interviewing) before. This is a great idea!
4. People come to college and start dating young. They have a lot of experience in dating and a little experience in interviewing. This exercise is definitely a great attention getter. I've never been more interested in an exercise.
5. This exercise is something that students can relate to.
6. The exercise is brilliant! I wish my other professors could find a way to relate to us.
7. Once the dating discussion started, it was hard to stop talking. There were a lot discussions and complaints from both men and women. There were questions about dress code, table manners, table conversations, behavior, oral and physical language, and even types of eye contact. Discussing these things was fun and exciting. I learned a lot.
8. I saw the relationship between dating and interviewing and found something more sensitive and deeper about this analogy. Dating is just another kind of communication which its purpose is finding a lover. A job interview is a form of communication which its purpose of finding a job. Therefore, dating is a two way communication and so is job interview. Thank you for helping me see the light!
9. Whatever we need to pay attention to on a date, we have to also pay the same attention on a job interview like dress code, verbal and non verbal communication, eye contact, manners, the follow up conversation, and how to answer some of the questions.
10. I appreciate the part of the exercise when we discussed impression management, attention getter information, and how to go with the flow of the conversation.
11. I can definitely say this was one of most productive classes I've ever had.
12. I know what it takes to get the job! Thank you for giving us the tools to make the right choices.

DISCUSSION

Why this Exercise Works

Students report they find this activity to be both accessible and fun. This exercise works well because it is based on two key pedagogical principles: 1) retention is encouraged when new information is meaningfully connected to prior knowledge; and 2) interactions among learners is one of most powerful predictors of behavioral change.

Students draw on their own experiences to discover how strongly their behavior shapes others' perceptions of them. They can go from something familiar and currently important to

them—dating—and generalize to something less familiar but inevitable: what it takes to create and sustain positive impressions in business settings, such as in networking and job interviews.

Students like this exercise because it highlights the importance of planning a wide variety of verbal and nonverbal behaviors—that their success depends both on how well they meet and exceed the interviewer's expectations compared with other candidates seeking the same positions. This knowledge helps students feel in greater control in these unfamiliar, highly stressful career communication situations. Without this kind of insight, they can be discouraged by the sink-or-swim outcomes of job interviews, where they either are

selected or rejected for a job opportunity. With these insights, they are in a better position to analyze their own behavior for strengths and weaknesses as employers rarely reveal this information to rejected candidates.

As faculty we like this exercise because it enables us, with only a modest adjustment to curriculum, to help students gain insight into why communication should be planned to facilitate interpersonal, career, and other business communication goals (Schullery and Gibson, 2001).

CONCLUSION

In short, this exercise, with tangible relationships identified between specific behaviors and networking and job interview outcomes, sensitizes students to the importance of gaining early career insight—understanding that career communication success, just as dating success, largely depends on an effective communication plan, one which addresses a wide range of verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors to meet the needs, as appropriate, of romantic and career encounters.

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APPENDIX

Guidelines for Instructors

Title: *From the Classroom to the Boardroom: How Understanding "The Rules" of Dating Can Help Undergraduate Business Students Understand "The Rules" of Effective Career Communication*

Objective: To raise awareness of the importance to interpersonal and career success of planning for important business communication encounters.

Strategy: Students draw generalizations about how their collective insights into effective communication during dating can help them better understand how to plan for, execute, and follow up in career communication situations, such as networking, job interviewing, and customer interactions.

Groups: Students count off by threes to form ad-hoc groups, with a minimum of three students and a maximum of five students per group. With very large classes, the same question may be assigned to more than one group.

Instructions: Each group takes five minutes to brainstorm answers to one of the three pairs of questions. Each group appoints a scribe--who writes the group's responses on a chart pad--and a spokesperson, who communicates the group's results to the class.

Pedagogy: To guide discussion, faculty ask students to choose behaviors from these lists that are also applicable to networking, job interviewing, and other business communication encounters. Instructor leads guided discussion around the business communication principles that this exercise supports. Students compose a journal entry indicating how this exercise will change the way they approach initial interviews.