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Helping Students Master Interview Skills

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Abstract

This action research paper reports on successful class sessions designed to teach students communication skills required to navigate career level interviews. The work is divided into three sections: the first introduces the literature concerning the need for interview training to assist students seeking jobs; the second details the practical class sessions and gives clear instructions on how to conduct them with special emphasis given to practice of interview questions in a classroom setting; and the third suggests two class sessions on mock interviews, one done in pairs and the other in a group setting. The conclusion states that the sessions have been successful and well-received by the student as shown by their higher quiz grades. The authors offer this course in a private university in Lebanon where English, not the mother tongue for the majority of students, is the language of instruction. The students vary between near-native fluency for those who obtained their high school diploma in an English-system school to an intermediate level of fluency for those who did their schooling in a French-system school. The level of fluency in the language is crucial since it seems to indicate how familiar students are with the culture of the system in general. As professors, our aim is to train the students to master the necessary interview skills to prepare them for the positions they are applying for.

Keywords: Candidate, communication skills, interview, mock interview, prospective employer

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Introduction

As the title indicates, “Helping Students Master Interview Skills”, this action research paper presents English in the Workplace as one of the most challenging but interesting courses to be taught at the university level. It is the last of a series of four courses in language communication skills offered at the university level. The first two courses cover basic writing, the third teaches argumentative writing, and the fourth prepares students for business communication.

On the first day of class, students are introduced to the need for excellent communication skills, and the “critical role communication plays in the contemporary organization” (Ober, 2003, p. xiii).

One of the five main learning outcomes of the course is to prepare students to find a suitable job, and to acquire the necessary skills currently needed to do so. To reach this outcome, the students are introduced to the complex work environment and are taught to consider the employment interview as a sales presentation. Five and sometimes six class sessions are regularly devoted to the mastery of interview skills. The preparatory class sessions are designed to make the mock interview and the final graded interview successful experiences for the students.

According to Locker and Kaczmarek (2014), many employers expect their potential employees to be more assertive, follow instructions scrupulously, and participate in up to five interviews (phone, video, Skype, face to face). In addition, prospective employers may expect the candidates to provide a sample of their work, and often, their writing. Candidates may also be asked to give an oral presentation. Besides emphasizing the importance of communication skills during an interview, this course also motivates students to prepare very seriously for the actual interview. Teaching interview strategy offers instructors an opportunity to be creative and proactive in presenting the information and gives students ample time to practice the skills needed to succeed, building their confidence before they begin the interview process.

Current views on interview skills

There is ongoing research interest on the validity of the employment interview as one of the most prevalent methods to assess and select a candidate. Obtaining a job interview is considered a sign of success from the applicant’s perspective. According to Hansen and Hansen (2017), a survey showed that the best bet for getting hired is to master interview skills, since, according to the authors, poor communication skills are one of the prime reasons interviewees were not considered for the open position. It is common practice today for employers to value the interview performance and professionalism more highly than the candidate’s background and qualifications. It is also believed that practice will help reduce interview anxiety and improve interview skills.

There are several ways to practice before a job interview, such as mock interviews, video-recorded mock interviews, interview simulations, rehearsal, and informational interviews (Hansen & Hansen, 2017).

Mock interviews simulate real job interviews and are conducted with a prospective employer and a candidate; the career professional can provide worthwhile feedback and guidance

to point out the candidate's shortcomings and also acknowledge the areas in which the interviewee excels. Boosting the candidate's confidence by indicating his or her strengths will result in improving interview skills, according to Krueger (as cited in Hansen & Hansen, 2017). This is supported by the fact that many career coaches and consultants offer such training. The syllabus of English in the Workplace course supports this statement.

Mock interviews provide additional valuable preparation when they are recorded to assess the non-verbal aspects as well. Focusing on attitude and non-verbal communication allows the interviewee to reduce distracting habits or nervous gestures, thus avoiding interview blunders that he or she may be unaware of (Hansen & Hansen, 2017).

If the candidate thought he or she did very well on the interview, but did not hear back from the interviewer Mele (2017) suggests the following:

According to Alpert (as cited in Mele, 2017), a psychotherapist and coach in New York City, some applicants rely too much on similar generic replies. Alpert recommends that the candidate act naturally during the interview since the prospective employers want to know what is unique about the candidate. In addition, he recommends that the applicant be familiar with the workplace culture to assess whether they share similar values or not. In the same article, the author advises the candidate to learn as much as possible about the company culture. He also points to the fact that applicants should talk about their professional successes with confidence. Another piece of advice is for the interviewees to ask pertinent questions and to answer questions about their accomplishments.

Training Students for the Interview

The class sessions described here have been effective in the classes of Junior and Senior students preparing to search for career employment. In the authors' experience, many students are unfamiliar with the concept of a résumé and cover letter, as well as the need to actually prepare for job interviews. Most students working while studying are in jobs that are most often not related to their majors; they have been hired as waiters, shop employees, work in family businesses, or employment certainly beneficial from a communications standpoint, but the job may not have required stringent interviews. It is not uncommon for students to comment that résumés can be exaggerated somewhat, or that cover letters may not be necessary at all. Due to this misconception, it is important to inform students that competition on the job market is extremely difficult, and that setting oneself apart from all the other graduates by showing one's individual competencies is necessary in order to be hired for a career position. In these classes on interview strategy, tips on résumés for international company interviews are also included. For instance, many students may have a different view of what is suitable to include in a résumé. Since students may be looking for employment abroad, it is important to bring to their attention the cultural nuances of working outside their country. One point discussed is that personal information such as age, marital status, and religious affiliation is often considered privileged information in other parts of the world.

There are several means to convince students that a job search, especially one during the last semester of university must be given ample time. The first method is to invite a guest speaker

into the classroom, preferably a graduate that has been successful in landing a solid position and can present first-hand experience that correlates with the information on the student syllabus. Allow ample time for questions and make sure the session is informal. Such sessions have been more successful when instructors have sat in the audience and allowed the guest to moderate. Another very effective means of motivating students to be pro-active in a career search is to invite the director of the university Placement Office to give a short presentation to the class concerning the services it offers. In most cases, the Placement Office has sample resumes, lists of companies in the area that are hiring, or have recently hired graduates from the university. They also sponsor annual Job Fairs and publicize regularly scheduled visits by companies interested in the university's graduates. This information will help the students to be more informed and in charge of their job-search process. A third means is to select one or two examples of sample career and job search sites from the web. 'Monster.com' offers company profiles and reviews, career advice, education programs and résumé help (Monster.com). According to Edwards (2015), 4 Best Websites for College Graduates Seeking Jobs, students should be encouraged to join LinkedIn, and consult Indeed, Start Jobs.net and Career Builder. Once the students are informed and motivated to get to work, the following class sessions can be fruitful.

***Interview Basics.** It is helpful to begin the series of classes dedicated to interview preparation with a definition and some theory. According to the Collins English Dictionary, a job interview is "a formal meeting at which someone is asked questions in order to find out if they are suitable for a post of employment." This definition makes it clear to the student that the interview is very important since it may determine whether the applicant is chosen for the position or rejected. Thus, students are informed that the objective of an interview is to present one's best features and show strength under pressure during an important meeting. Interviews measure an applicant's personality, character traits, social skills, team-playing ability, emotional intelligence, and people skills among others. Candidates should know their skills and what sets them apart from other candidates.*

Moreover, an interview may take 30 minutes to an hour or sometimes longer. It is estimated that the first 5 minutes are used for introductions, the next 15 to 40 minutes are dedicated to background and credentials, and approximately 5-10 minutes are left for the interviewer to ask questions and find out if the interviewee is a fit for the organization. Students must also be aware that the primary focus for the recruiter is how well the candidate is suited to the job description, as well as their competency and compatibility.

Students need to know the difference between the types of interviews; the most common being structured and unstructured: It is commonly agreed that the structured interview is a more valid indicator than the unstructured interview (Judge, Higgins, & Cable, 2000). The interview is thus considered a selection tool, and it helps in the decision-making as it provides pertinent information about the candidate. Interestingly enough, the interview is also seen as a selection tool by applicants for evaluating the recruiting organization.

The professors realize that students cannot be expected to know what to do and not to do during the interviews, since the majority have not had work experience and are not always familiar with the culture of the workplace. The authors insist that applicants present themselves as being

well-prepared and having done research on the company. They must also be ready to discuss an offer if it is made. It is suggested that students take notes during the interview.

As candidates have only one chance to make a first impression, non-verbal communication (smiling, eye contact, facial expressions, body language, voice, etc.) is also explained. One additional element that stressed in the interview preparation sessions is professional dress for the interview. The tips given are simple, but necessary. First, perfume for both men and women should be light or non-existent. Human Resource representatives who have come to classes as guest speakers have reported that when they see up to 25 candidates in one day, strong perfumes have a negative effect. Jewellery should also be kept to a minimum; it is suggested that earrings be simple and not dangling, for instance. Both men and women should wear, to a formal interview, a jacket and a long-sleeved shirt. Though navy and black are often suggested, they are not the only colors; the idea is to be professional.

Students also benefit from practicing posture and attitude during an interview. Often classes are begun by asking the students to shake hands with each other. It is useful to remember that a handshake is firm and brief and uses only one hand. Students should also bring a small notebook and a pen with them along with their portfolio and an extra copy of their résumé to the interview as it may be necessary to write down information the interviewer shares; an address, a website to consult, etc. The answers to the student's questions may also be written down.

According to Macan (2009) students should keep in mind that the interview is a social interaction between the interviewer and the candidate in which both parties gather information from each other. The importance of promptness is emphasized, along with a positive attitude while answering the questions, professionalism, and complete honesty. The writers also stress four factors applicants should consider before making a final decision if an offer is made:

1. Job content: what is the nature of the job; is it interesting, does it fit into long-term plans or is it a temporary position?
2. Employer: Does it seem that the candidate will be comfortable in the organization; will it contribute to their personal growth?
3. Salary and benefits: How are individual increases determined, how are promotions handled, and what are the benefits offered?
4. Co-workers: Is the candidate able to “fit in” with other employees; what is the culture of the company?

Students are also informed to write a thank you email after the interview (Doyle, 2017).

Interview Practice. Once students are familiar with basic interview theory, the necessity of knowing how to answer the questions calmly and sincerely is emphasized. Students read interview questions; it is not necessary to have the students answer all of them; rather, they must learn the process and principles involved. Following is a list of common questions students must be prepared to answer:

1. Tell me about a difficult decision you have made

2. How did you overcome an obstacle when working with a difficult colleague?
3. How did you get along with your team members?
4. Was there a time when you went beyond expectations?
5. What would your fellow employees say about you?
6. Tell me about a time you had to deal with a crisis
7. How do you handle having too much work and too many deadlines?
8. What accomplishment gave you the most pride?
9. How do you work under pressure?
10. What is the title of the last book you read?
11. What are your hobbies?
12. Who are your role models?
13. Would you consider furthering your education?

Most students have been genuinely surprised when they realize that it is quite negative to begin an interview with: I'm willing to do anything. Rather than portraying a hard worker, this answer shows that the applicant is desperate for any job.

Classroom Sample Sessions

Divide the class into groups of three or four. If the class is large, a group of five is also appropriate. Have students designate a moderator to guide the discussion, a note taker to keep a record for the whole class discussion, and a time keeper to ensure that all the tasks are completed on time. Encourage all members of the group to take notes. We have found the following questions beneficial for practice:

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Where do you see yourself in five years?
3. Are you willing to travel?
4. Tell me about a time when you were successful in a team project.
5. Are you a leader or a follower?
6. Describe your strengths.
7. Describe your weaknesses.
8. Why should I hire you?
9. What is the most significant contribution you have made or can make?
10. What is the biggest mistake you made?
11. What is your greatest fear?

Ask the students to prepare what they believe are the wrong answers to these questions and then what the correct answers are. Students share their findings in a whole class setting after 25 minutes.

Before students begin their collaborative work, it is helpful to give an example so that students get the idea without having to ask a lot of questions. For example, ask students the question: What is the salary you expect in this position? The wrong answer is to give a precise number such as \$35,000 annually. One possible correct answer could be: "I have read that an entry-level engineer at your company begins at \$35,000 annually. I believe after this interview

you will be convinced that I merit at least that amount.” Another appropriate answer could be: “I would like to start with the same salary given all your entry-level engineers. I am certain I will prove my efficiency quite quickly.”

After having conducted these sessions a number of times, it has become clear that culture plays an important role in how students answer these questions. Before being trained on how to answer professionally, a large number of students tended to answer without pausing or without having thought through the answer; their answers were often similar to narratives rather than explanations that highlighted their many strengths. Poise in one's answers is a means to project maturity.

Sample interview questions and answers

The goal is for students to feel confident in their answers and to showcase their strengths. The suggested answers below do just that:

1. Tell me about yourself: How would you describe yourself is a common question, and here is where students should highlight education, experience, and career aspirations.

I am an ambitious Education student presently in the last year of my degree. I have completed a minor in English and I now feel confident that my language abilities would allow me to teach high school students. I also love music and have played the piano for the last 10 years. I am interviewing here today because I believe my credentials meet the job description you published.

2. Where do you see yourself in five years?

In five years, I see myself as being more experienced in this field, able to instruct others, and having been promoted once.

3. Are you willing to travel?

The question concerning travel is an interesting one. The wrong answer that is often given in class sessions is: No, I cannot travel as I do not want to leave my family and friends. Though this answer may be true, it is not a mature answer. For the positive: I am willing to travel for work and see it as a means of increasing my knowledge in the field as well as learning about how others do work. Negative: Presently, I have family responsibilities, which do not allow me to be away for long periods of time; I am however able to travel for short periods for conferences and whenever needed.

4. Tell me about a time when you were successful in a team project.

I led a student group in my Senior Study class last semester. We were eight people and our task was to prepare a proposal for a new Attendance Policy for the University. I found that the way to succeed was to make sure that all of us had a role to play, deadlines to meet, and one member who volunteered to be the moderator. As I had learned about collaborative work in my Business English course, I volunteered and we scored an A.

5. Are you a leader or a follower?

This question merits a class discussion. Most students are tempted to answer: I am a leader very quickly and leave the answer very short. Though it is important to learn how to answer questions concisely, this question requires thought. After class discussion, the following answer was agreed upon as a basis on which to work: "I am a leader when, in a group setting it is clear that I have information that will benefit the group. For example, in my senior project last semester, I was able to lead since the subject, New Technologies in Mechanical Engineering, was one in which I had experience after having done a three-month internship with X company during the summer of 2015. But, I am also willing to follow when I can benefit from others in my team who are more knowledgeable than I am.

6. Describe your strengths.

This is a complex question, but I can honestly say that I am a good communicator. I am interested in listening to other people, and I enjoy a fruitful discussion. For this reason, I always score high in university debates. Another one of my strengths is that I am ambitious. Though I realize that success takes time and experience, I am constantly looking ahead.

7. Describe your weaknesses.

This is also a question that students must practice. It is an opportunity for a little humor in the classroom as some "wrong" answers lead to a few giggles. It is important to discourage students from mentioning how they have been on probation, are excessively impatient with others, or shy away from working with others. Rather the principle is to be honest and to turn the weakness into a positive opportunity for learning. For example, I am quite introverted and would like nothing more than to work on my own, individually. But I do realize that today's businesses are not run like that and we all need each other's input. So, I have been making an effort to join small teams in my classes and to collaborate with others. It is working and last month I scored a B in my Chemistry Group Experiment.

8. Why should I hire you?

I believe I should be hired because I have the credentials you are looking for to fill this position; I have the Economics degree, and have completed three internships in the same area; I believe I have the basic expertise required. In addition, my résumé shows that through participation in university engineering clubs, my familiarity with other cultures, due to the travel I have done, I am confident I am able to do this job. Show that you understand the position you are applying for and that you are the type of person they are looking for. Demonstrate through examples, not only words.

9. What is the most significant contribution you made or can make?

Last summer, I was working to earn money for my fall tuition at a children's sports camp in the mountains. My actual responsibility was to ensure the children's safety on the bus that brought them to the daily activities. As I was observing the 10 year olds at the swimming pool, it was evident that some were less experienced swimmers than others. The life guards were hard pressed to take care of all the children. So, I asked the camp director if she would mind if I volunteered to give swimming lessons to those children who were not confident in the water. She agreed and at the end of the summer, the children I had instructed had improved greatly. This is

just one example of how I believe that when we are committed to an organization, we should give all we can.

10. What is the biggest mistake you made? Be honest, and show integrity. Explain what you learned from the mistake.

The biggest mistake I have made so far is not having taken my first semester at university as seriously as I should have. I was very excited to have more freedom than during high school, to choose my courses and their timing. I was surprised to know I could choose even my professors. I wasted too much time on socializing rather than on studying. My GPA suffered the first semester; I did learn that I have to focus on my goals. My GPA is now 3.00 again and I am on track to graduate in June.

11. What is your greatest fear? Not succeeding in your career, not landing the job desired, failing your loved ones, whatever the answer, be honest and stay calm.

My greatest fear is not succeeding in my career after having put in so much time and effort at university. My parents are so proud that I am their first university graduate; I think though that it must be normal to be a little anxious as I transition into working life. I am confident that with hard work I will be hired and will make my way up in the company that I choose to join.

Along with the questions that they will be asked, students must also practice asking a few questions of their own to the interviewer. In our classes, we always stress that these questions show the interviewer that the students have "done their homework" concerning the company and are informed about the company's outlook, but are also thinking ahead.

Sample students' questions:

1. How does this company ensure professional development?
2. How long does an average employee stay in his or her position before being promoted?
3. Are employee initiatives taken into consideration?
4. Are employees encouraged to participate in decision-making?
5. What do employees say about your organization?
6. Why is this position open?
7. Who determines raises and promotions?
8. What are some benefits for employees?
9. Do you offer a bonus for extra work or excellent job performance?
10. What does a typical work day look like?

Mock Interviews in Groups

Before this session, students prepare a résumé, practice writing both solicited and unsolicited cover letters, and review typical interview questions and responses. When the mock interviews are held after the interview practice classes, students are less hesitant and genuinely enjoy the opportunity to share their work with their classmates. During the class in which typical interview questions are discussed, emphasis is laid on how to personalize interview answers to set one apart from other candidates.

Procedure

In this context, provide a job ad to the class members three days before the mock interview. This gives them time to properly prepare as though they were going to a real interview. Example: A multinational company located in X is searching for graduating students in the fields of Engineering, Business and the Humanities to build a new children's shoe factory. Candidates should have completed their degrees within the last year or be planning to do so at the end of the present academic year. Fluent English is required; other foreign languages are an asset. Candidates should have computer and excellent presentation skills in addition to the ability to work in a team atmosphere.

1. Tell students to fine tune their résumé, write a cover letter for this position, and come to class dressed for an interview on a specific date. Inform them that some students will be randomly chosen to play the role of interviewer while others will be interviewed. Prepare a rubric for successful interviews and post it on your class website.

2. Before the students arrive in class on the day of the interview, assign students to a group, name the interviewer of the group and post the lists on the classroom door. Take a few minutes to set up the class in a group setting and make it easy for students to go to their group table by placing a copy of the list of names and number on one of the desks. Groups of five are most successful. One interviewer will interview four fellow students.

3. Welcome the students at the door and ask them to join their groups at the desk. Compliment them on their professional attire and attitude. Simulate a job interview atmosphere. Distribute a list of questions to the interviewers, a rubric for each student, review the ground rules and ask all students to leave the classroom to wait outside to be called back in. The interviews begin with the interviewers going to the door and calling in the candidate. The duration of each interview is approximately 5-6 minutes.

4. After the interviews have been completed, each interviewer tallies the points of the rubric and chooses the candidate he or she would have hired. The class is called back in and in a whole class format, each interviewer gives a short presentation in which they announce the "winner" and explain the rationale behind the decision. After the class has heard the interviewers' decisions, the class reflects on the exercise and what they have found beneficial. In a 50 minute session, only the interviews and the announcement of the candidates chosen can take place. The discussion is continued during the following class.

Mock Interviews in Pairs

Below is the second approach to preparing students for the "job hunting experience." Prior to the mock interview session, we review the parts of a résumé and emphasize what should be included and what is not necessary or discriminatory. Also, the cover letter, and the difference between solicited and unsolicited cover letters are explained. Finally, review sample interview questions and possible answers to present the candidate's best features, and minimize weaknesses.

Procedure

Before the mock interviews session, the students are asked to prepare their résumé and bring their own ads based on their majors or area of interest (online, or newspapers, university billboards, or other sources, may be used to find an appropriate ad). Students respond to the ad by writing a solicited cover letter and attaching it to their résumé. Students are advised to minimize weaknesses or failures and to turn them into learning experiences and positive challenges. They are also required to dress formally. This role-playing method seems to actively engage the students and provide good practice for the actual graded interview.

1. Students work in pairs and take turns interviewing each other; one playing the interviewer and the other taking on the role of interviewee. They will give each other feedback on answers, eye contact, body language, and attitude, (general delivery), and discuss what they did well, and what they need to improve so as to acquire better interview skills. When done with the interviews, each pair shares their “findings” or results with the whole class (professor and classmates).

2. A class discussion follows to emphasize the positive outcomes and to overcome the negative ones. Sample answers are given for “difficult” or more challenging questions.

3. Last, students are asked to come up with adequate questions of their own to ask the interviewer on the graded interview day.

Graded Interview

On the day of the graded interview, students come to the professor’s office dressed professionally, with their résumé and cover letter, and any sample, for example, a portfolio (for a graphic designer, engineer, or architect) or a sample of their writing (for a journalist, etc.). In this simulated interview session, the professor acts as potential employer and the student is the candidate. At the end of the 7-10 minute interview, the professor/interviewer gives the candidates appropriate feedback and tells them if they have been hired or not with a reason/rationale as to why. Their strengths and weaknesses are addressed and appropriate feedback is given.

Reflection and conclusion

This action research article underlines the importance of acquiring interview skills in order to be competitive since today’s employers look for highly qualified communicators. Most textbooks and interview-preparation websites list the most commonly asked interview questions. They also encourage students to be prepared for stress interviews, panels, and interviews over lunch. Two crucial goals must be planned into the in-class activities: first, interview answers must be prepared in advance so as to present the student’s particular credentials, and second, the students must practice giving concrete examples from their previous employment or university courses to show how they are capable of taking on new responsibilities.

In conclusion, there has been continuous research on the employment interview. It is agreed that the structured interview has greater predictive validity compared to the unstructured (Macan, 2009). The job interview is a very popular tool among prospective employers and

organizational decision-makers. It is considered an essential and reliable factor in the selection process.

Upon reflection on the methods practiced in the training sessions, professors found that all the sessions were beneficial and that both mock practice sessions are valid for preparing the students to acquire the necessary skills needed in the workplace.

The first method (in group), though the instructor provides the job ad, has the advantage of providing valuable peer feedback. From experience with this class session, the interviewers provide the class with excellent feedback: Examples of student feedback is as follows:

1. Clara gave examples of how she used creativity in an Engineering project. She was friendly without going overboard. She had excellent posture and showed interest in the questions I asked.
2. Brad explained very clearly how he was obliged to leave university for one year in order to make money to pay his tuition and thus explained the gap in his résumé.
3. Cyril does have a 3.8 GPA, but he was able to show me that he also participates in extra-curricular sports and holds down a part time job at the gym near his house.

As university instructors are quite aware, students are not always on task during a typical class session. However, it was noticed that during the first mock interview, students do eagerly wait outside the classroom reviewing their résumé, and take interest in what questions the interviewer asked their colleagues. Requiring that students dress professionally is a positive feature in making the class a success.

The second training session (in pairs) is a cooperative learning experience in which one student provides feedback for a classmate; all students are engaged and participate actively until the final feedback is given by the professor. In this scenario, students bring their own ad to class rather than the professor providing a generic job ad, which allows the students to practice for future job hunting.

In fact, students practiced mock interviews in our courses have praised them for their similarity to real interviews, as they have provided an excellent picture of what to expect in real life situations. Moreover, by having held classes in which theory was explained, students were familiarized with the process of an interview, and practiced interview strategy in small group, and a whole class format, the outcome of the graded interview has been significantly more positive. Students are consistently better prepared and less stressed, while also showing critical thinking in their responses.

Finally, English in the Workplace is a practical course in which students realize that effective communication is the most sought after skill in the job market worldwide. There is no doubt that employers today expect superior qualifications in an increasingly “shrinking” world. Clearly, excellent communication skills and language competence are highly valued. The ability to speak, read, and write fluently, gives the applicant an edge on the competition. Specifically, a

well-prepared and professionally conducted job interview is a critical “cornerstone” of good business communication (Ober, 2003).

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