

Using the KASTER Narrative to tell your story: A Reflective Exercise for Providing Verbal Evidence of One's Professional Qualifications

The universe is made of stories, not atoms.

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Many students have difficulty explaining how their Knowledge, Abilities, Skills, Traits, Experience and Professional Relationships (KASTERs) are related to an employment opportunity. Asked to elaborate, most students are at a loss for words. This is especially true for their volunteer and service learning activities. This exercise is designed to help people give energy and meaning to their professional qualifications by putting them in the form of a brief narrative. Students are taught how to create such a narrative. Student illustrations, comments, feedback and suggestions for faculty will be presented.

Keywords: KASTER, Behavioral Interviewing, Situational Interviewing, Narrative, Job Search, Employment

Introduction, Objectives of the Exercise and Teaching Implications

Although one's professional qualifications are easy to merely list on a resume, most people have rarely thought of them in a way that they would be able to express verbally in a succinct and coherent way. A resume is far too incomplete to communicate the complexity and totality of what one has done in the past and what one can potentially do in the future. This is especially true for students that have participated in volunteer and service learning activities. Most students typically do not see the connection between these activities and their professional activities. This is often due to the underlying assumptions of volunteer and service learning activities.

Service-learning is designed to benefit both the student and the community. For the community, the focus is on meeting specific community needs. For the student the focus is usually on enhancing the understanding of course content. Volunteerism and other forms of community service focus on the benefits to the recipients. Although extremely important, I believe these foci are somewhat myopic. I believe that both service-learning and volunteerism can have a strong influence on professional development and the student should be shown how they can do so.

Historically interviews were very informal and unstructured; they frequently broke down to a simple, general question of "tell me about yourself". This lack of specificity frequently led to what a professional colleague of mine once called a "mutual exchange of lies". If the applicant wanted the job, s/he would tell them anything to get the job and if the interviewer wanted to hire the individual, s/he would tell them anything to get them to take the job. Much of this changed when interviews became composed of "behavioral" and "situational" types of interview questions.

For most students, their skill sets or professional qualifications are only briefly transmitted to employers through their resume. Their knowledge, abilities, skills, traits, experience and professional relationships (KASTERs) are merely recorded there in a few words. When asked to elaborate upon them, most students are at a loss for words. This exercise is designed to help people give energy and meaning to their professional qualifications by putting them in the form of a brief narrative. A narrative is story. In this instance, it is a brief story or illustration that expands upon a particular knowledge, ability, skill, trait, experience, or relationship [KASTER] that one possesses. The accompanying diagram (Appendix A) and worksheet (Appendix B) provide a useful framework for the organization and verbal presentation of a particular KASTER. This framework helps the student present their narrative in such a way that will help the listener better remember what the individual said and apply that information to the position being applied for.

Although knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA) have frequently been used to describe an individual's skill set, I have found that it is helpful to also include the additional aspects of traits (T), Specific Work Experience (E), and Professional Relationships (R) that an individual has had or possesses.

This framework is not restricted to a retrospective manner, it can also be used in a proactive way in order to plan what could be on one's resume in the future and the story that one might tell about their KASTERs in the future.

Presentation Format

I have used this exercise in a classroom setting, but I believe that it could be modified to be used on-line. I have used this exercise with both graduate and undergraduate, but I do not believe that it is restricted to just a university setting. I believe that anyone seeking employment or thinking about changing employment would find this exercise beneficial. This exercise would be specifically beneficial to individuals that are leaving one professional field to enter another. This exercise would help them show how their previous knowledge, abilities, skills, experience and professional relationship are relevant to the new field. I believe that this exercise can be successfully discussed within 60 minutes.

The materials provided the OBTC conference will be sufficient for this presentation. Nothing else is required. Handouts and other supplemental material will be provided by the author.

Overview of the Presentation

The basic exercise will be described and its underlying rationale will be explained. Individual participants will be given an opportunity to complete the exercise themselves as well as be given the opportunity to discuss the exercise in redesigning or modifying the exercise for their particular circumstances. There also will be a discussion emphasizing the importance of linking all forms of previous employment, experiential learning (coops, internships, etc.) as well as volunteer and service learning activities. I will also present my experience with this exercise; student illustrations, comments and feedback; as well as suggestions for faculty and other

interested parties in using this exercise. An illustration of how this exercise was completed by one VITA volunteer is presented as part of the supplemental material (See Appendix C).

Application and Contribution to the Conference Theme

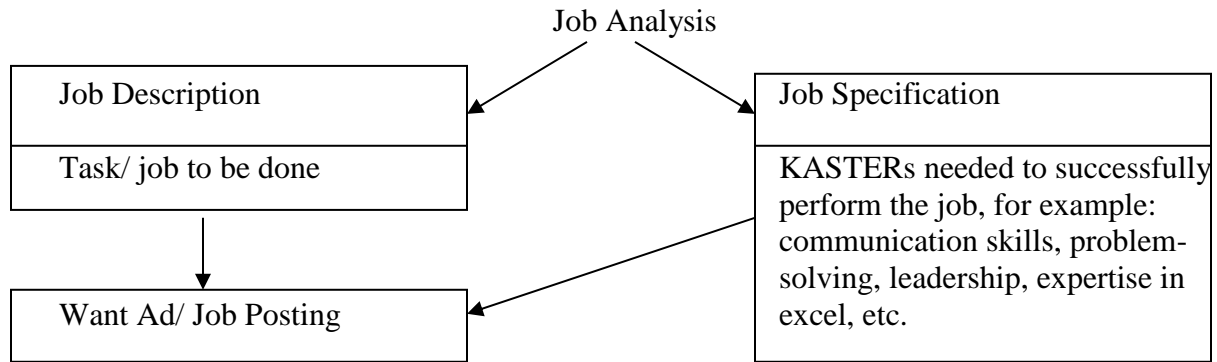
As mentioned earlier, service-learning is designed to benefit both the student and the community. For the community, the focus is on meeting specific community needs. For the student the focus is on enhancing understanding of course content. Volunteerism and other forms of community service focus on the benefits to the recipients. Although extremely important, I believe these foci are somewhat myopic. I believe that both service-learning and volunteerism can have a strong influence on professional development and the student should be shown how they can illustrate such a relationship. I have provided an illustration of this exercise applied to a Vita Volunteer in Appendix C.

Although I have used this exercise for a number of years, I have not presented this proposal at the OBTC National Conference in the past and it is not presently under review for any other venue.

Supplemental Material

Appendix A

KASTER Framework



Example

KASTER Needed	Work experience, extracurricular activity, or from other where you acquired or demonstrated this particular KASTER.
Communication Skills	I worked as a hostess, and worked in sales and both instances I...
Problem Skills	When I ..., one of our biggest concerns was... and I helped to...
Leadership Skills	As ..., I organized...../ or successfully implemented.....
Expertise in Excel	I took a course in... and we did..., later I used excel to.....
Team Building	When I worked for.., I was responsible for...but had no authority to...
Developing and Maintaining Professional Relationships	I had an opportunity to but needed to identify someone who had successfully....

Appendix B

The Student's Narrative Worksheet: A Reflective Exercise for Providing Verbal Evidence of One's Professional Qualifications

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Briefly answer each of the following:

A. Pick a knowledge, ability, skill, trait, experience, relationship (KASTER) you wish to illustrate. Choose a professional qualification that is necessary for a job/ position that you might be applying for in the future. This can be easily done by acquiring job postings or want ads for which you feel that you would be qualified.

B. What are the rationale/ reason for its importance: listed in the want ad/ job posting, a typically important KASTER related to this type of job; an important professional strength of yours.

C. What was the situation (opportunity or problem) in which you demonstrated that professional qualification?

D. What was the goal(s) of this situation: what was to be achieved, or avoided, created, etc.

E. What did you do?

F. What happened? Were you successful, accomplished your goals, avoid the problem, or seized the opportunity? How did you know you were successful? Were the results of this situation measured? How were they measured?

G. Close the loop. What did you learn? What would you do differently?

After you have answered each of these questions, briefly tie the various components of this worksheet together and briefly write what you would say to someone to illustrate your possession of this particular (KASTER). ***Remember, you need to be concise and yet complete in no more than a few paragraphs.***

I am constantly seeking feedback from how people have used my exercises and what they have learned from their use. Consequently, I have each individual to briefly answer the following questions in respect to this exercise.

1. What did you learn from this exercise?
2. What was positive about this exercise?
3. What was negative about this exercise?
4. What difficulties did you experience and how did you resolve them?
5. What suggestions would you have for enhancing this exercise for other students?

Appendix C

Illustration of KASTER to VITA Volunteer's Experience

KASTER Needed	VITA Situation that developed your KASTER
Communication Skills	I needed to explain complicated tax code in a way that put taxpayers at ease and encouraged them to have confidence in my ability to correctly file their returns...
Problem Solving Skills	One of the major challenges we faced at the tax site was.... I was able to identify..... and develop a way to...
Leadership	Because of my experience as a tax preparer, I was able to participate in academic and extracurricular activities and bring my expertise to the classroom/meetings/planning process...
Computer Literacy	TaxWise Software is very comprehensive, yet you need to know how to override entries, link to various forms, and run diagnostics...
Maintain Professional Relationships	I worked side by side with business professionals, community organizers, and managers with many years of experience... I also signed a volunteer agreement that emphasized confidentiality of taxpayer information, which built trust...
Customer Service	Some tax appointments lasted longer than the end of our shift. When we stayed and helped the client get a large refund with credits, they were so appreciative they cried. Then they returned with homemade cookies to thank us!

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