Chapter 5
Towards a Method for Research Interviews using E-Mail

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ABSTRACT

Researching people's ideas and experiences of Urban and Planning Studies can be carried out in a variety of ways, but the most obvious is to ask them. This can be done qualitatively, using semi-structured or unstructured interviews, at an early stage of the research process, when it is important to explore participants' ideas prior to any quantitative investigation, or for investigations where in-depth and detailed information about individual thinking is important. Face-to-face interviews are a 'gold standard' against which other qualitative methods of investigation can be compared. However, contemporary developments in technology provide a wider range of opportunities for qualitative researchers to collect rich data for analysis. Such technologies enable participation from any part of the world at any time, and allow the collection of video material that can capture many aspects of verbal and non-verbal interaction for further analysis. The use of e-mail interviews provides a relatively low-tech methodology for investigations and has advantages over a live interview, on the one hand, and a high-tech video interview, on the other.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we present an approach to using e-mail for carrying out semi-structured interviews. We have developed this approach during the course of conducting several research projects in the area of pedagogy, using students and lecturers as participants. We will trace our approach from initial, serendipitous e-mail interviews to the development of a mature e-mail interview protocol. We illustrate the various stages with several excerpts from our interviews. In addition, we have asked some of our lecturer respondents what they think about e-mail interviews and how

they view the relationship between interviews and online pedagogies. We include an analysis of their reactions and insights. We review advantages and disadvantages compared to both live interviews and high(er)-tech approaches involving online video interviewing using tools such as Skype.

Face-to-face interviews are synchronous in time and space lending themselves to spontaneous and responsive interactions between interviewer and interviewees. Other interview methods that are synchronous in time but not space are interviews that take place by telephone, or use computer mediated communication, such as MSN messenger, a chat room or Skype. Each of these methods has relative advantages and disadvantages to the researcher, such as whether interviews can be standardised, how important social cues are for interpretation of communication and what disruptions or distractions the interviewee is likely to experience during the interview. For instance, in a telephone interview, the interviewer has no view of the respondent's environment, while a video interview may enable a remote researcher to see more of the respondent's situation.

Web-based technologies for communication and content creation are widespread among the 'Net Generation' (Gray, Chang, & Kennedy, 2010). Online activities in higher education and daily life include blogging, using wikis, media authoring and publishing, socialising and other formal or informal virtual interaction. In universities, course management systems such as Blackboard are common resources that support learning of distance students as well as learning on-campus. Web-based technologies are also integral to many current research projects in education, particularly when participants are geographically or temporally remote, or diverse in some way, such as mobility or hearing impaired. The internet as a data-gathering tool is perhaps most commonly used for surveys and questionnaires, as current software enables both collection and statistical analysis to be carried out with relative ease. Online, open-ended questions may be less successful in eliciting full responses from participants, depending on the particular format used (Denham, 2004).

BACKGROUND

Research approaches in the field of Urban and Planning Studies closely mirror those in the broad field of social research. They often incorporate statistical analyses – particularly for market research projects – but also utilise qualitative approaches, such as interview studies or observations or a combination of different methods, to illuminate different aspects of the problem under investigation. For instance, Popkin, Leventhal, and Weismann (2010) explored the difficulties faced by female adolescents growing up in high-poverty neighbourhoods. They approached their sensitive research topic by the random allocation of families to three different treatment groups. Following the seven-year experimental phase, 1000 families participated in an evaluation process, which incorporated semi-structured interviews with family members and an ethnographic study involving a subset of the families. The research team considered their approach to be 'family focused' (p. 724) as it utilised a variety of different methods to build a broad picture of the researched situation. The role of interviews in this study was to add richness to the complex problems involved in urban poverty. Martin (2004) also described a mixed-methods approach to researching neighbourhood activism. In her study, the mix utilised (quantitative) archival analysis of documents and (qualitative) interviews. Her analysis of the documents uncovered two different philosophies surrounding land use, which then led to an appreciation of alternate views obtained by speaking with people. She claims that 'much of urban politics involves the interactions of these spaces' (p. 593) acknowledging the complex diversity of views.

For qualitative researchers a major focus is on the collection of diverse views and subjecting these views to some form of analysis. Although

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