Email interviewing: the 'pen-pal' method

What is it?

Researchers enter into a personal dialogue with learners by email. This can be used to collect reflective, written contributions from learners over an extended period of time.

Strengths

- Can record experiences that learners might subsequently forget.
- Can build up a picture of the process of studying as it happens and track developments.
- Allows the researcher to personalize the questions asked at other data collection points.
- Minimal intrusion into learners' time.
- Uses a basic, robust technology which stores data automatically.
- Maximises sustained participation through establishing a personal dialogue between researcher and learner.

Weaknesses

- Time intensive for the researcher to craft individual questions and follow up responses.
- Inconsistency in timing and content of questions across students and courses. This may be important if you are looking to combine data across participants.
- Researcher and learner are both subjectively involved in interpretation as they compose their exchanges, which means careful checking for validity against other sources of data (triangulation)

Process

1. Each learner is allocated to a single, named researcher, who signs their messages personally.
2. Questions are adapted for each learner so that they take into account the course the student is taking and any prior knowledge about their own individual experiences as a starting point.
3. Timing of messages is organized to coincide with significant events, whilst avoiding busy periods close to assignment deadlines or exams.
4. Researchers follow up with secondary questions or comments as appropriate.

Examples from the Learner Experience projects

The Thema project has been soliciting written contributions from research participants by email, four or five times over an eight month period. This 'pen-pal' method is used in combination with a traditional interview to build a portrait of each learner.

Support and Synthesis Team: https://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/JISCle2/CC+licence

Audio logs

What is it?

Providing facilities for learners to audio-record their daily experiences.

Strengths

- Can provide rich data about day-to-day events, very close to the time they happened.
- This can support greater accuracy than later accounts
- Less time intensive for learners than keeping written logs.
- Timing of recording of data can be logged accurately.
- Captured voices give an insight into the emotion of the experience.
- Can produce vivid audio clips for staff development and dissemination.
- Audio logs can be used to provide artefacts for later in depth interviews.

Weaknesses

- Instructions need to be clear and freestanding as the researcher is not present to explain and clarify.
- Participants also need to be motivated to stay involved without personal contact with the researcher, though this can be addressed through regular contact of other kinds.
- Ease of use of audio recording equipment is crucial to the success of this method. Unless the system is plug and play, data will be lost and participants may drop out.
- Learners need to give consent in advance for their voices being used and must understand the difficulties of anonymising audio recordings.
- It can be very time consuming to code the data for analysis.
- Poor recording practice and background noise can result in data loss.

Process

1. Learners are provided with a means of identifying their audio logs such a voicemail number to call, or a personal digital voice recorder to keep with them.
2. In the voicemail scenario, learners hear a recorded message when they call, reminding them about the information to project hopes to collect. Prompts might also be provided in a written form or by email.
3. Learners leave their message when they have something to record, such as immediately after using a technology for learning, or after a critical incident.

Examples from the Learner Experience projects

The LXP project used audio logs as one of their data collection methods to create case studies of individual learners. They found a good response rate from students providing very rich data from small snippets of information.

The STROLL project gave learners a choice of keeping diaries on webcams, camcorders or digital voice recorders. During each data collection point, learners were prompted each day over a five day period to reflect on different aspects of their e-learning experiences and learning journeys in line with the key research questions.

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Interview 'plus'

What is it?

A variation of a semi-structured interview which uses an artefact during interview to support guided recall.

Strengths

- Prompts discussion of actual learner behaviours and associated feelings and beliefs.
- Allows the learner to set the agenda for part of the interview.
- Artefacts learners have created, or events they initiated, are usually more revealing of personal practice and beliefs than tutor-led activities
- Artefacts support recall of real incidents to an extent that is far superior to a simple interview
- Less time-consuming for the researcher than observing learner behaviours in real time.
- Allows the learner opportunities for reflection and choice, leading to deeper responses.

Weaknesses

- Requires skilled interviewer to tease out beliefs, practices and feelings about the real incidents.
- Can take more time than other interview techniques e.g. in identifying appropriate artefacts and understanding their role in the learner's context
- Some learner artefacts are held in group learning spaces that present ethical difficulties: has the researcher gained permission to access the site?

Process

1. Learners are asked to prepare or bring something to talk about at interview:
    - Learner generated artefacts might be anything created in a learning context (such as progress files or coursework), something they have created for the researcher (diary or log) or a critical incident or event.
    - Researcher generated artefacts could include observation or transcripts of learners undertaking a task or software generated tracking data.
2. The researcher prepares a guided recall protocol to help elicit the issues of most interest.
3. During interview, the interviewer starts from, or quickly moves towards, the real behaviours involved in production of the artefact or in the critical incident.
4. Learners are asked to recall: what they did (their practice), why (their reasoning, motivation and strategies) and what the result was (their experience).

Examples from the Learner Experience projects

LexDis used interview 'plus' as part of their participatory research design. They spent some time working with learners to understand what artefacts they would like to bring to the project. Their preferred artefacts were examples of the strategies that they employed when using technology to support their learning.

The E4L project worked with learners to produce a personal list of technologies they used, which became an artefact for subsequent interviews to allow the researcher to discuss any changes in technology use and to ask about transitions.

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Talking walls: dynamic feedback from diverse student groups

What is it?

Similar to a world café, learners are asked to record their thoughts and feelings in relation to a number of different topics. Noticeboards/whiteboards are located around the walls of a room and learners are invited to reflect on the issues and respond with comments. The walls can be paper or whiteboards or learners can use post-it notes which can be stuck onto a surface. The talking wall can be used as part of a short activity or left up for a longer period of time to elicit more feedback. The activity can take place physically or virtually using a discussion board or wiki format.

Strengths

- Can record experiences that learners might subsequently forget.
- Can elicit feedback on a number of different topics at the same time
- Learners can decide what they want to contribute and how without feeling pressured to join in
- Allows the researcher to personalise questions
- Minimal intrusion into learners' time.
- Maximises engagement by asking learners to contribute what they feel comfortable with

Weaknesses

- Time intensive for the researcher to type up findings if done physically
- Learner is subjectively involved in interpretation as they compose their responses
- Tool may be open to abuse/spamming if left unattended
- Questions need to be clear and unambiguous in order for all to understand
- Responses can sometimes be slow to appear – there is a fear of an empty wall
- Some comments may be inapproropriate/irrelevant

Process

1. Learners are asked to reflect on the statements/questions and think about what they mean to them
2. When they re ready, learners approach the talking wall and write their answer/response to the statements
3. At the end of the process, the material generated is typed up and shared with the learners and research team. If the wall is a multi day activity it is a good idea to take a photo of the wall as it grows to make it easier to type up at a later stage and also to prevent against possible vandalism/tampering with
4. Where possible, issues that have been raised are addressed in an open forum to demonstrate commitment to making changes/learning from feedback

Examples from the Learner Experience projects

Bradford have used this approach as part of their work into listening to learners experiences of living and learning in the 21st century (Pathfinder, HEA e-Learning Research Observatory projects, HEFCE/Paul Hamlyn Trust HERE! project).

Recipe card provided by Rebecca Currant, University of Bradford

Support and Synthesis Team: https://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/JISCle2/CC+licence

Nested narratives

What is it?

An interactive space for people to make sense of their experience and their identities, by exploring their own stories and associations in a range of modes and media. [The initial parts of the approach are based on the Biographic Narrative Interview Method].

Strengths

- Elicits, captures, and allows further exploration of the person's own stories in their own voice (literally and metaphorically)
- Enables the person to explore and articulate tacit and deep tacit understandings of their own experience.
- Enables the person to remain in their own story space, and set their own agenda.
- Includes a range of media and modes, from face-to-face to multi-media to kinesthetic (touch) interfaces.
- Provides rich interactive multi-modal texts that can be used (with the story teller's permission) for conversations, analysis, and exemplars: for formal research; for portfolios; for interaction with tutors and mentors, with peers, at work, and informally in the community.
- Provides multi-layered reflection and critical thinking in depth, by doing, not by instruction.
- Can be applied to experiences in a wide range of settings: in education, at work, and in the community.
- Provides a practical, activity based method for researching the ontological as well as the epistemological issues of learning and student experience.

Weaknesses

- Requires a trained facilitator for the initial story telling process. People can be trained to interview each other, but some measure of support is required.
- The multi-media and multi-modal associations and links take some time to add. The rich, multi-layered texts that result more than justify this.

Process

1. The story teller tells a story about a particular experience or event. .
2. The facilitator listens and takes notes, and asks for more detail of particular parts of the story. The original story and the subsequent 'nested' stories are audio recorded.
3. All these story elements are transcribed, and the story teller decides how to cut the transcript into story elements. Each transcription, and its associated audio clip is captured in an interactive interface.
4. The story teller can then link and add associations and texts related to each story element within the interactive interface.
5. More layers of associations and commentary can be added, using different media and modes, including kinaesthetic or Tactile User Interfaces (TUI's).
6. The resulting interactive text is used by the researcher, by the story teller, and (with permission) by others too, each for their own purposes. The story teller may later add further links and associations, so the sense making process does not have to 'end'.

Examples from the Learner Experience projects

The *Affordances for Learning project* developed and used the Nested Narratives approach to research student learning, particularly with mature students returning to do Foundation

Degrees. With the addition of the interactive graphic interface, the project has changed radically.

What started out as a project to elicit stories about learning with minimal research interference has turned into a methodology for people to make sense of their experience and their emerging identities on their own terms and in their own voice, using their own associations in a range of media and modes.

The process of exploring sense making has become a sense making and learning experience *in itself*, which goes far beyond traditional reflection. The resulting artefacts are no longer 'research data', collected once and for all. They are sense making tools which have ongoing parallel lives, as it were: on the one hand, in the community and in the lives of the story tellers, and on the other hand as research artefacts and texts.

These artefacts also have yet another, potential, 'life' as interactive research 'reports', which would be 'read' interactively, and as interactive portfolio and exemplar artefacts, which would also be 'read' interactively. This opens up new ways of producing and circulating the results of research.

Potential Links [additional category?]

1. Interview Plus

The two methods seem to complement each other. The 'created artefacts' and the 'stories and associated texts' functions in the two methods overlap, as *guided recall* or *facilitated articulations of the tacit.*

2. Digital Story Telling

Digital Story Telling and Nested Narratives are both created within the story teller's own story space and sense making endeavours.

3. Portfolios

Nested Narratives have value, in themselves, as individual and often quite private sense making processes and subsequently, artefacts. So although Nested Narratives cant just be picked up and copied into Portfolios, they can be rich resources for the story teller to use and to selectively 'mine' for adding to Portfolios.

4. Learning and Research

It seems quite possible to integrate these particular forms of research and learning, and to make the research process an ongoing learning experience not only for the researcher, but for the learners too.

Recipe card provided by Roy Williams, University of Portsmouth

Support and Synthesis Team: https://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/JISCle2/CC+licence

Technology card sort

What is it?

The card sort is designed to be used as part of an interview process to help learners talk about their use of technology.

You could also use the card sort as a developmental activity with learners, to help them and you to understand more clearly their uses of technology for learning. The cards provide an opportunity for participants to learn about less familiar technologies and to share ideas about using them for learning. In this case you would not record the process and any notes you took would be to help you support those particular learners more effectively, not for research or any other data gathering purpose.

Strengths

- More interesting to participants than standard interview methodologies.
- Focuses attention on to specific topics during the interview
- Can be used as an ice breaker
- Allows participants to recollect more examples than they would have originally considered.
- Can be analysed both quantitatively in addition to qualitatively
- Learners feel in control
- Allows interviewer to be more focused with questions
- Less time consuming than observation in real time
- Easy to combine with other methodologies
- Can use the student's own voice to create the content

Weaknesses

- Time required to develop cards and consider content
- Can be time intensive in data analysis
- Additional time required if used in addition to basic interviewing
- Wording on cards may not be consistently understood.

Process

1. Print off the technology cards on stiff paper or card and cut into individual cards.
2. Set up your recording equipment to record the interview (if relevant)
3. Ask participants to rank the technologies in order of importance to them
4. As they move the cards around, prompt them to tell you what they are thinking and why they are putting cards in that order
5. Use this opening activity to lead into other interview questions such as:
    - Has that picture changed since you came to University?
    - How were you introduced to use the top three/four technologies?
    - What would be the impact on you if you could not use the top three/four technologies?

Examples from the Learner Experience projects

This activity has been used by the JISC E4L project to help learners talk about their use of technology in an interview. You can view some video clips of interviews built around the card sort activity at http://www.northampton.ac.uk/e4l/ics

Support and Synthesis Team: https://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/JISCle2/CC+licence

Telephone interviewing: semi-structured interviews

What is it?

Researchers enter into a personal dialogue with learners by pre-arranged telephone interviews. This can be used to collect learners' answers to open questions with prompts for specifics and can be repeated over time to build a fuller picture of the learner.

Strengths

- Can build up a picture of the process of studying over time and track developments.
- More interactive and immediate than email interviews.
- Less time intensive than email interviews
- Minimal intrusion into learners' time.
- Almost as good as a face-to-face interview.
- Maximises sustained participation through establishing a personal dialogue between researcher and learner.
- Digital recording of the interview allows editing and transcription.

Weaknesses

- Transcription of the interview is very time consuming.
- Scheduling of interviews can also be time consuming and requires 'chasing' participants.
- Possible to lead the participant
- Possible to move on too quickly and not get a full answer from the participant.
- Digital recording may not always be clear depending on the phone line quality.
- Often an answer would need further explanation, It is helpful to ask if a specific example from the interviewee to improve this
- While answers may seem okay during an interview, on later transcription, they may found lacking in explanation – often this can be resolved using follow-up emails.
- Interviews of around 40 minutes seem to be the maximum participants thought reasonable

Process

1. Email contact to arrange an interview time.
2. Semi-structured interview schedule specific for each course and time point.
3. The depth of responses is improved when the edited list of questions are sent to participants before their interview. Giving them time to reflect and form their answer to each question.
4. An email reminder the day before the interview much increases the chance of the participant answering the phone at the arranged time.
5. Interviews spread across each course, timed to follow important stages, but avoid when coursework or exams are due.
6. Later interview schedules adapted to take account of responses in earlier interviews.
7. Recordings transcribed for inclusion in case studies and analysis in NVivo

Examples from the Learner Experience projects

The PB-LXP project has been conducting telephone interviews with research participants over three time points during their course. This semi-structured interview method has been used in combination with questionnaire research to understand the impact of ICT on practice-based learning across the courses contributing to the project.

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