

The E-interview: A Digital, Asynchronous Data Collection in Schools

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Abstract

The qualitative interview is a time-consuming process, and in school environments it has become more difficult to obtain quality interview time with school administrators and teachers due to an increasing number of organisational pressures and the intensification of work. The impact of New Public Management, with its emphasis on managerialist concepts of efficiency, has changed the nature of schools in the past two decades, making the use of time an accountable variable for school administration. For the qualitative interviewer, asynchronous internet and other digital communication technologies offer solutions to both the temporal and methodological issues faced by researchers, when all parties are digitally connected.

A key issue for the researcher during any interview is the problem of how best to represent the respondents' responses. In the audio recording of interviews there is a temptation for the researcher to write an authentic representation of the colloquial speech of respondents. While it can be argued that this is a true account of what was said, it may demean the respondents. An advantage of the e-interview is that both parties can review the written (emailed) text as it passes back and forth between the interviewer and interviewee, and make corrections if they are needed. Additionally, the *spell check* and *grammar check* alert respondents to errors in their responses.

It is argued that when dealing with literate respondents, in purposive samples, the e-interview facilitates more considered, valid responses to the questions in the interview process.

Key words: e-interview, qualitative research, interviewing, school-based research.

Introduction

The nature of schools changed in the late 1980s with the advent of New Public Management (NPM) (Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow & Tinkler, 2006; Gronn, 2003a, 2003b; Moos, 1999; Sachs, 2003) and school became more like businesses. In education, school leadership was moved by a new cult of efficiency. Sachs and Logan (1997), (as cited in Sachs, 2003, p. 20) claimed that the key precepts underlying the managerialist changes to the public sector were based on the beliefs that traditional structures, procedures and services were inefficient and managerial reforms were essential to increase productivity in government services. As a result of increased accountability and scrutiny of schools' operations under New Public Management, principals' time for pedagogic and curriculum issues in schools became limited, as they were increasingly engaged in the expanding managerial demands of schooling (MacNeill, Cavanagh & Silcox, 2005). Time constraints have become so problematic for school leaders that Grubb and Flessa (2006) were forced to ask if the principalship were "A job too big for one". Closely associated with the introduction of NPM was the uptake of the digital technology of the internet. The synchronicity of the growth of time constraints and the expansion of internet connectivity has facilitated the potential usefulness of the e-interview as a viable method of data collection in schools.

The E-Interview

The e-interview is a digital, asynchronous version of the interviewing process, a specific form of conversation, which is foundational in qualitative research (Kvale, 1996, p. 19). Stewart and Cash (1991) perceived the interview as "... a process of dyadic, relational communication, with a predetermined and serious purpose designed to interchange behavior and involving the asking and answering of questions". (p. 3) In this limiting definition, the authors failed to acknowledge the possibility of more than two people being involved in the interview (dyadic), but they acknowledged the putative relational basis of the recorded dialogue. The interview has become more interactive, not a passive recording of the respondents' answers to the questions put by the interviewer (Kvale, 1996). Gubrium and Holstein, claimed that "Researchers are more committed to allowing the people involved to speak for themselves in their own way. The interview, therefore, has become the shared task of a collaboration" (as cited in Hoffman, 2007, p. 319).

The role of the interviewer, as Kvale (1996) observed, can be described by the metaphors of a traveller or miner. (p. 3) The miner travels the world seeking buried metal (knowledge), which is done by stripping away the overburden, seeking the "nuggets of essential meaning". (p. 3) Furthermore, the mined ore is then purified through an analytical process and the end-product is valued according to its purity. On the other hand, the traveller metaphor is less focussed as the traveller *wanders* through landscapes and conversations. Kvale noted that the metaphors represent two different research genres, with the traveller representing a postmodern approach to constructive understanding, while the miner metaphor representing a more positivist approach. (p. 5)

Interviewing allows a researcher to gain insights into cultural experiences that are often denied to outsiders. The information that respondents provide can range from observations to interpretations. Weiss (1995) noted, "We can learn about what

people perceived and how they interpreted those perceptions. We can learn how events affected their thoughts and feelings. We can learn the meanings to them of their relationships, their families, their work, and their selves.” (p. 1)

Schools, as organisations that have a key role in society, have provided rich grounds for research.

While it appears that the term *e-interview* predated Bampton and Cowton’s (2002) paper, these authors were responsible for bringing the term to the attention of qualitative researchers. Even in the short time since the publication of this paper, the use and reliability of digital communication has increased exponentially. Previously, the authors (2002) complained about the failure of the email system and its affect on their research:

Unfortunately these were not as successful as the first, largely because of our university’s e-mail system, which suffered from several breakdowns, one of which was for several days. This not only meant considerable delays in being able to send out our messages and delivery problems for interviewees, which undermined momentum and bred frustration, but also it took us into the summer vacation period, when both interviewees were unavailable for several weeks. The interviews were therefore not completed satisfactorily. Even worse, one interview record was lost when one of the university’s e-mail servers developed a very serious fault. (para. 22)

Five years after the publication of Bampton and Cowton’s paper, James (2007) reported, “The use of ICT [Information and Communication Technology] as an integral element of teachers’ professional lives”. (p. 964)

At the present time it is expected that the potential respondents for an e-interview research project are more likely to be more computer literate than the respondents in 2002, when Bampton and Cowton first described the e-interview. For example, Kupetz and Ziegenmeyer (2005) successfully used e-interview to evaluate the effectiveness of their students’ multimedia competency:

The e-interview is a useful e-learning course component as it supports the understanding of TEFL issues by combining studying texts and reflecting the knowledge against the background of the expertise of an experienced grammar school teacher. (p. 191)

It must be noted that an e-survey is not an e-interview. In a survey, the respondent receives all of the questions at one time, and often there is little opportunity for the researcher to go back to the respondent to seek clarification on some of the responses. In contrast, an e-interview is shaped so that all of the respondents’ responses can be explored and developed. The e-interview is delivered with one or two questions at a time, and it is more flexible than a survey protocol. While researchers may develop a semi-structured interview schedule, subsidiary questions seek essential elaboration and then the responses influence the next round of questions. A survey is generally a one-shot attempt to gather information, while an e-interview interactively explores the respondents’ answers, over time.

Addressing the Inequality of the Interviewer/Respondent Relationship

It is rare for there to be a power balance between the interviewer and the respondent. Attacking the Gubrium and Holstein (2002, as quoted in Hoffman, 2007, p. 319) perception of an interview being a conversation and a “... shared task of a

collaboration,” and Kvale (2006, p. 481) referred to this as a “qualitative progressivity (sic.) myth, where dialogical interviews in themselves are good and emancipating...” Kvale (2006) explained the unequal power relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee:

It may be concluded that a research interview is not an open and dominance free dialogue between egalitarian partners, but a specific hierarchical and instrumental form of conversation, where the interviewer sets the stage and scripts in accord with his or her research interests. The use of power in interviews to produce knowledge is a valuable and legitimate way of conducting research. With interview knowledge jointly constructed by interviewer and interviewee, overlooking the complex power dynamics of the social construction process may, however, seriously impair the validity of the knowledge constructed. (pp. 485-486)

A major problem with transcribing what respondents say in interview is dependent on the interviewer’s emic attempt to represent authentically the words that are spoken. In literature, writers often use representations of colloquial language to add dimensions of understanding to the readers’ understanding of a character. For example, Dickens (1854/1996) embellished the character of Stephen Blackpool in *Hard Times* with an apt description of his regional dialect:

“No, sir, sure I ha’ not coom for nowt o’ th’ kind.” (p. 83)

In ethnography, the colloquial representation of respondents’ speech can also be used. When Levinson (2007) interviewed English gypsies about education, he tried to give a sense of authenticity to one of the gypsy’s responses about making reed baskets:

I think all this education has made us weaker. When I went to that school it absolutely terrified us. It broke our spirit ‘cos it felt like rest of yer life you’d be put in schools. I always felt like the countryside, the world itself, was our classroom: we learned so much from our parents and grandparents about everything. They’d go into a wet field and pick a’ armful of reeds and then they’d come home, and then they’d chat and fry a bit of Joe Gray, they’d got half a dozen baskets made. (pp. 23-24)

The colloquial authenticity of transcripts of interview is often problematic. Nespore and Barber (1995) explained the dilemma of representing authentic speech: We originally used quotes that included hesitations, pauses, false starts and so forth. We now think that far from being markers of “authentic” speech, these are artifacts of interview practice.... We are forcing people to talk extensively about complex issues ... and treating how they said things as reflections of underlying rules and interactional competencies. But it is an arrogance that harks back to the idea of research as an extractive enterprise to act as if only researchers have the right of revision. (p. 56)

Writers’ attempts at authentically representing respondents’ speech suggests that there is an inherent power asymmetry in the interview equation. Jaffe (2007) agreed: Controlling detail is one form of exercising authority, but including detail is another; as Bucholtz has shown elsewhere ... fonts and annotations technologize a text, and in doing so, confer scientific expertise and authority on the author. (p. 834)

Comparing and Contrasting E-Interview and Interview Protocols

Using Kvale's (1996, p. 88) seven stages of an interview investigation as a scaffold, it is possible to examine the strengths and weaknesses of both the face to face and the e-interview processes:

1. Thematising
2. Designing
3. Interviewing
4. Transcribing
5. Analysing
6. Verifying
7. Reporting

Thematising is a term used by Kvale (1996, p. 89) to describe a "... conceptual clarification and a theoretical analysis of the theme investigated, and the formulation of research questions". There is not a difference between the face to face and e-interview on this point because all good interviewing is based on sophisticated conceptual analysis.

Designing is the study undertaken to examine the process of collecting information and addressing what information is going to be collected. In a face-to-face interview, the design addresses the mechanics of constructing the interview schedule and how the information is going to be collected. The e-interview is the same, but it also needs to address the issue of connectivity. Clearly, only potential respondents with access to email can be a part of an e-interview. In studying schools, all teachers and principals in Australian public schools have access to both email and internet communication. The question arises as to whether an e-interview is an interview or a questionnaire/survey. The questionnaire/survey usually represents a one-shot collection of information, but the interview and e-interview have the advantage of continuing the dialogue on points of clarification.

Interviewing: The interviewing process itself is where there is a major difference between the face-to-face and the e-interview. In the face-to-face interview, the interviewer has an advantage of being able to observe the facial expressions and body language of the person being interviewed, and it can be argued that this gives an added insight into the quality of the answers. On the other hand, the e-interview is removed from the dynamic interpersonal interplay of the interview and it could be argued that the interviewer receives more considered responses than in face-to-face interviewing.

Transcribing: In the transcribing stage, the e-interview has a clear advantage over the face-to-face interview that is usually recorded on audio-tape. The e-interview does not require transcription because the respondent writes responses to questions and then has time to correct spelling, grammatical, and conceptual errors. Correcting the transcripts of interviews is an issue that faces every researcher in face-to-face interviewing. Many researchers publish transcripts exactly as the interviewee has spoken to give a sense of authenticity to the transcript. For example, when Levinson (2007, p. 26) researched literacy in English Gypsy communities, he transcribed the audiotapes phonetically- "I can read more than I can write. It's OK

cos me 'usband reads and writes". Such a literal transcription influences the readers, and in doing so probably demeaned the respondent in readers' eyes.

Analysing interview transcripts is easier in the e-interview situation than in the audio-taped interview because the respondents have had opportunities to correct the transcripts and therefore the transcript should represent a more accurate account of the respondents' replies than those found in the face-to-face interview. Inaudible responses are a case in point, and while some information is lost in audio-taped face-to-face interviews, this does not happen in the e-interview.

Verifying the statements in the interview and the resultant analyses fit into what Kvale (1996, p. 229) calls *the social construction of validity*. In terms of validity and the consequent generalisability of qualitative research, much has been written on the topic. While Stake (1994) developed the concept of naturalistic generalisation, Merriam (1998, p. 211) saw *reader or user generalisability* as a useful concept for small, qualitative case studies. It can be argued that the availability of the running record of interview in the e-interview process gives the interviewee many opportunities to refine and verify their responses.

Reporting the research in a manner that meets scientific and ethical criteria is important. The advantage that the e-interview has over the face-to-face interviewing is that the respondents have a greater input in the final report of their responses than in traditional interviewing thus overcoming the ethical issues of misrepresentation. The final report for research based on the e-interview should be more polished, ethical, readable and professional than that of the face-to-face interview. These findings correlate with Bampton and Cowton's (2002) summary of the strengths and weaknesses of the e-interview:

- it offers significant savings in terms of time and financial resources, particularly in relation to the elimination of the need to travel or to transcribe tapes;
- it opens up possibilities for interviewing research subjects who would ordinarily lie beyond the geographical or social reach of the researcher;
- in some circumstances it might be more successful in accessing certain types of research data; but
- it provides a limited register for communication; and
- it is dependent on willing and competent access to reliable technology on the part of both researcher and subject.

Constructing On-line Dialogues

Firstly, a relationship between the researcher and the respondent needs to be established before the e-interview is commenced. In the present authors' experiences the relationship was established in face-to-face meetings in which the research was explained, and the respondents' commitments obtained.

Secondly, the complaint from respondents in James and Busher's (2006, p. 407) research was that sequencing previous conversations was problematic because of the time gap. When the email format is used long strings of conversation are added in chronologic descending order, with the current conversation at the top, in most cases. This causes a problem in that the respondents need to scroll down to refresh their memory of what had been said previously. The more effective strategy,

used by the current authors, is to use an attached word document with all of the transcripts attached to the questions and the program *Track Changes* engaged. This approach means that the researcher constantly edits and reflects on the narrative and the respondents, also, can reconsider their previous responses. Track Changes alerts the all parties to current changes in the transcripts. This strategy of putting the whole dialogue on display increases transparency and there are no surprises for either party when the final document is signed off.

The role of the email in this case is to communicate with the other party and to pass on the running records of the interview. For example, the Track Changes directs the respondent to the new questions (in red) in the attached Word document (adding the dates of the responses is also helpful). For example:

Interviewer (22 January): Why did you decide to become a teacher? [Is teaching a job or calling for you?]

AI (22 January): At the time it was something that I thought I could do well. I remember my year 5 teacher Mr XXX and thought it would be great if I could let kids have as much fun at school as he did and still get them to learn. Some of the strategies that I used when I first started to teach and some that I still use now are things that I remember him doing in class with us at YYYY Primary

Interviewer (24 January): Thanks AI. Have the decisions made by the principal about pedagogy enabled you to fulfil your initial motivation to enter teaching? Please give an example if you answer *yes*.

AI (26 January): Initially No. My first few principals annoyed me. I actually picked up more from colleagues. In one case it was the deputy who offered the most assistance in teaching students. It was not until 2001 when I came to ZZZ that I felt I was finally getting there as far as educationally meeting the needs of the students. Don't get me wrong I felt like I was a pretty good teacher and made great connections with students but there were always a few who slipped through the net. I could establish the relationships but could not get them to learn.

Interviewer (26 January): OK AI, what actions taken by the principal can be seen as a discharge of moral obligations (improving life for the students in the long-term) in bringing about pedagogic change in your school?

AI: (answer here)

Conclusions

In conclusion, a real advantage in e-interviewing is that power relationships are not as overtly influential as in face-to-face interviewing. In the virtual world of avatars and digital communication many communicants are less influenced by others in the interview equation. A major advantage in busy schools is that it appears that the asynchronous nature of the e-interview communication allows opportunities for reflection and correction for all parties. As a result, there are distinct advantages in terms validity, ethical concerns and the generalising of the findings when using e-interview, with literate populations that have email connectivity plus the required knowledge and skills to communicate electronically.

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