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# CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS

## Capturing What Is Unobserved

*Janice Miller-Young*

*In order to understand other persons' constructions of reality, we would do well to ask them . . . and to ask them in such a way that they can tell us in their terms (rather than those imposed rigidly and a priori by ourselves) and in a depth which addresses the rich context that is the substance of their meanings. (Jones, 1985, p. 46)*

An interview is an opportunity for the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) researchers to focus on understanding their students better and what they are experiencing in their learning. However, getting good data from interviewing requires asking good questions, and asking good questions takes practice. As an engineer, when I first engaged in SoTL, I was skeptical about interviews. I feared my inexperience with qualitative research could introduce bias, that I might unknowingly ask leading questions in an interview, and that I would just generally influence the data in ways I was not comfortable with or might not even be aware of. I've since used and participated in interviews and realized that an interview is not only an adaptable, flexible data collection tool but also a systematic activity that can be learned through practice, reflection, and feedback. So in this chapter I discuss not only important considerations for conducting SoTL research interviews but also strategies for learning how to do them well, which are just as important.

### **Benefits of SoTL Interviews**

Interviews can be used to gain rich insights into students' knowledge, experiences, perceptions, and feelings. Incorporating interviews into a SoTL study can be a positive experience for the instructor and students. Interviewing

students gives instructors an opportunity to listen and learn from students, and it gives students an opportunity to reflect on their learning, voice their perspectives on teaching and learning, and offer suggestions for improvement to a course or program. A good interview also allows unexpected information to emerge and be explored, a key benefit of qualitative methods.

Often when I work with instructors who are designing a SoTL study, I recommend including interviews in the study design, especially if they are intending to collect quantitative data using an instrument that has not been validated, such as a self-created rubric or survey. Adding interviews, which is using mixed methods, is one way strengthen such a study's findings. Sometimes instructors are quite convinced they will see significant differences in a quantitative measure such as test scores or survey responses as a result of some change to their teaching. I encourage them to ask themselves, What if I don't see a significant difference? Or any difference? What could be some possible reasons for that? and What if I do see a difference? What would I want to know more about in terms of explaining why there is difference? Then I suggest that an interview could help them explore those reasons.

Of course it's not as simple as just adding an interview to an otherwise existing research design. Like all research, data-gathering strategies in interviews must align with the goals of the study. Whether we are interested in the cognitive or affective domain of students' learning, a good interview protocol will include questions that elicit more than simply students' self-reported perceptions of their learning or their perceptions of which course activities most influenced their learning.

Students' knowledge can be classified as semantic (knowing facts, meanings, concepts), procedural (knowing how to do something), integrative (being able to connect and synthesize multiple knowledge models), or metacognitive (being able to think about and control one's cognitive and learning processes). Whichever aspect is of interest, it is important to develop interview questions that require students to demonstrate that kind of knowledge. Questions should generate responses that can be critically analyzed for their level of understanding or application of concepts or that illuminate their thinking process. Questions about how students do something, and which refer to concrete events or ideas, can be useful, such as, Can you tell me how . . . ? Can you walk me through the process you used to . . . ? or How would you respond to the view that . . . ? At the same time, interview responses may be filtered by students' expectations of what they think we want to hear and are representative of their thinking at only one point in time. Thus, it is best to triangulate interview results about student knowledge with other sources of data. Many possible data

sources are available to us as SoTL researchers. Course artifacts such as discussion board postings, assignments, and exam questions are just a few. For example, in a SoTL study with my engineering class on how students visualized two-dimensional drawings of three-dimensional structures, I discovered some themes about what students were struggling with through interviews. I analyzed their submitted course work and found evidence of the same struggles in some of their written problem-solving approaches as well, strengthening my conviction that the interview results were representative of what students struggled with in the course (Miller-Young, 2013).

Interviews allow us to capture data that cannot be observed, and thus they are particularly good for exploring the affective domain of student learning, such as their attitudes, beliefs, and motivations about the course content, teaching strategies used, their discipline, or learning in general. One might also ask about factors that may influence students' learning, such as values, social pressures, stereotypes, or anxiety. If one of these aspects is what we want to know about, we may decide that interviewing will be the primary mode of data collection. Open-ended prompts and questions that yield descriptive stories about students' experiences, opinions, and feelings work well, for example, "Tell me about a time when . . . . Can you give me an example of . . . ? Tell me more about that . . . . What was it like for you when . . . ?" (Merriam, 2009, p. 99). Questions like these also convey to interviewees that the interviewer is genuinely interested in their thoughts and experiences, thus building rapport and eliciting richer responses.

## **Preparing and Practicing Interview Questions**

Most SoTL studies benefit from semistructured interviews (Webb, 2015) in which a list of questions is prepared in advance to ensure the interview is focused enough to answer the research question. The interviewer also has the flexibility to respond to new ideas or issues as they arise, through probing and follow-up questions or even exploring unanticipated ideas through new questions.

In developing a list of questions or issues to be explored, I like to start with several specific questions I make sure I ask everyone and that are strongly aligned with the research question (see chapter 6). Perspectives based on my own experience, other studies, and theories help frame these questions. I might also prepare some open-ended questions with probes. Generally it's good to start with relatively neutral and descriptive questions at the beginning, such as, Tell me about your experience learning to work in teams, which invite the interviewee to start to describe the topic of interest, make the interviewee comfortable, and establish a rapport. The questions can then

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*A study by Cooper, Ashley, and Brownell (2016) nicely illustrated a semi-structured interview process. This study investigated the influence of a summer bridge program to help students make the transition from high school to introductory biology in college. The authors described how pilot exploratory interviews unexpectedly found that students who participated in a summer bridge program had sophisticated views of active learning, which they then wanted to explore further. Thirty-four semistructured interviews were conducted with Bridge students as well as students who were eligible for but did not participate in the program. Interviews were conducted while they were taking the college course and were the only source of data. The article included exemplar quotes to illustrate the common themes that emerged; some of the interview excerpts also included interviewer questions and illustrated how open-ended, follow-up questions can help get richer or clarifying information from interviewees. The study concluded that the bridge program positively affected student attitudes and self-reported behaviors related to active learning compared to those of similar students who did not participate.*

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become more focused such as, What factors do you see as causing conflict on your team? Thinking about what not to ask is also useful. For example, Why? questions are less effective because they tend to lead to speculation or make people defensive. It is easy to imagine that asking someone, Why did you try to solve the problem that way? might make him or her feel awkward or defensive. Asking multiple questions at the same time, leading questions, and questions that can be answered by yes or no should also be avoided. Further guidance on the technical details of interview structure and types of questions is available elsewhere; see, for example, Bishop-Clark and Dietz-Uhler (2012) and Merriam (2009).

After drafting the guiding questions, I next practice the interview. This process is critical and can be a learning experience in itself for novice and experienced interviewers. I first review the questions by posing them to myself. Are there any that would make me feel uncomfortable to answer? Are there any that are too detailed, too leading, or can be answered by yes or no? I'll also pilot test the interview with a student, checking to see if it's clear to the interviewee what is being asked. Does the student's body language seem to indicate that my questioning makes him or her feel valued rather than interrogated? I use my list as a guide but I also go with the flow, changing the wording and order of questions to fit the conversation. I may even conduct

more than one pilot interview, each time reflecting on the extent of spontaneous, rich, specific, and relevant answers they elicit from the interviewees; the degree to which the questions are shorter than the students' answers; which questions seem to elicit interesting or unexpected responses; and the degree to which the students' responses are clear (Kvale, 1996). In fact, I'll continue to reflect on these indicators of interview quality throughout the entire study, recursively refining my questions during and after each interview. For novice interviewers, a community of practice is also a useful way to develop, practice, and reflect on an interview protocol, adding the benefit of multiple perspectives on the process and the opportunity to be interviewee as well (Miller-Young & Boman, 2017). Being interviewed, whether by an experienced or novice interviewer, can be a valuable way to learn how the interviewer's behavior can influence the thoughts and emotions of the interviewee (Hsiung, 2008). As a more confident interviewer who is genuinely interested in participants' perspectives, I now look forward to listening and responding to an interview as it unfolds, probing for more detail or clarification and being surprised by new and unexpected ideas that may emerge.

## **Conducting the Interviews**

In addition to planning and practicing the questions, a number of other important and interrelated aspects about conducting SoTL interviews should be considered. How many students will be interviewed? How often and when? Who will conduct the interviews? As a researcher, I keep the question and philosophical approach in mind in making such decisions, but as a teacher I also consider my relationship with my students and how to maintain it or even strengthen it through a well-executed study.

### *How Many Students Will Be Interviewed?*

This depends on the interest in breadth versus depth. To understand the variety of experiences of students in a large class, 20 to 50 interviews using a purposeful sample makes sense. For in-depth case studies, interviewing a single student may be appropriate. For small classes in which the researcher has a good relationship with students who feel strongly about contributing, all of them might be interviewed. Usually, I plan to interview as many of the students who volunteer as possible, making it clear in advance that interviews will continue until saturation is reached (no new information is emerging from the interviews), so that some students aren't left wondering why they didn't have the opportunity to participate. One of my experienced colleagues says she always knows when she's finished interviewing because she starts to get bored.

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*Corbett (2015) illustrated how interviewing can be an effective technique when conducting intensive case studies of just a few individuals. The author described how he observed the connections between a learning disabled (LD) student and a course-based peer tutor in a first-year composition course. The author was not the instructor for the course, but recruited for and coordinated the peer tutoring program, and thus was able to do classroom observations followed by in-depth interviews. With thoughtful and rich narrative, the author described not only the compelling stories of the student's and peer tutor's struggles with their LDs, which were revealed during the interviews, but also the many times he was surprised by what he heard. The appreciative tone and rapport he developed through his interviews was evidenced by the fact that when he indicated to the student interviewee that the interview was complete, the student continued to offer his reflections, emphasizing what he thought were the most difficult struggles he had experienced. The author concluded his study with a deeper appreciation of "what it means to struggle, to persevere, and to make the most of what 'others' of all backgrounds and abilities have to offer" (p. 471). He also described the ethical dilemmas he struggled with throughout the research process, being particularly worried about the potential to objectify or victimize the LD student. It is interesting to note that when he asked the student to review the manuscript before submitting it, the student responded with enthusiasm about how touched he was to have such a detailed description of his experiences be respectfully shared with others and how he felt honored to have been part of the research.*

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### *How Often and When?*

Often SoTL researchers wait until the end of a course so they can conduct the interviews themselves, but there are considerations other than simply convenience. If the impact of a particular teaching strategy is of interest, interviewing students as soon as possible after the learning experience or later to assess learning or change over the long term will be useful. If in-depth, narrative accounts or changes over time are of interest, multiple interviews might be appropriate. For studies in which themes are allowed to emerge from the data, it is good practice to check one's interpretations of initial interview responses with a follow-up interview, building trustworthiness into the study while also maintaining the trust of students. In reality, sometimes constraints such as resources, scheduling, and sheer numbers of participants

dictate how often and when interviews will take place, and we must make the best of it and acknowledge the limitations.

### *Who Conducts the Interviews?*

SoTL researchers often conduct interviews themselves, as their deep familiarity with the research question and context allows them to probe and respond to unanticipated information effectively. It can also be a way to show students that we care and want to learn from them. Other considerations include the sensitivity of the topic and whether students might be more forthcoming if their identity was not attached to their comments, at least for the instructor. Deciding whether the instructor or someone at arm's length from the interviewees would be a more appropriate interviewer is a judgement call that will likely be influenced by the instructor's disciplinary training and worldview. Training student research assistants to be interviewers can resolve these tensions. Senior students who have taken the course or similar courses are well positioned to be interviewers; however, they still require from the instructor a significant investment of time for training, particularly for less structured interviews. Thus, for a small number of interviews and for instructors who want to take a very exploratory approach, conducting interviews themselves often makes sense. When a large number of interviews will be conducted, it is worth the time to hire and train an interviewer. Good training requires creating opportunities for trainees to practice, conducting the first few interviews with them, gradually giving them more agency during interviews, and monitoring and analyzing the interview process together as the study progresses. Although time intensive, it is a valuable process.

### **Closing Thoughts**

Interviewing is a valuable way to understand students' experiences and perspectives, and it can be used in SoTL studies with a wide range of questions and research approaches. Practicing and gathering data through interviews is a time-intensive and sometimes ethically challenging process; however, it allows us to see what is otherwise unobservable, and the richness of data that interviews can generate is more than worth the effort. This richness helps to not only advance our collective understanding of teaching and learning but also share compelling stories that challenge our assumptions about the realities and experiences of our students. Beyond these benefits, an interviewer who is flexible and responsive to unexpected information elicited from students effectively allows students to move from being passive research

participants to active contributors in the research process. It is one important way to give students agency and voice in what is attended to in researching and also in practicing teaching in higher education.

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