

NCRM Bitesize Lessons for Teaching Social Science Research Methods



7: Teaching Qualitative Interviewing Using a Developmental Approach

How are qualitative interview skills taught?

There are various pedagogical strategies for teaching interviewing which have been developed and researched by qualitative researchers. Roulston¹ identified two emphases evident among research methods educators. One of these concerns encouraging students to practice interviewing using coursework and/or independent projects. The other concerns encouraging students to reflect on interviews and interview transcripts.

Hoover et al. (2018)² proposed three domains for learning interview skills: (i) procedural, i.e. the practical skills; (ii) interpersonal, i.e. managing human interaction; and (iii) reflexive, i.e. encouraging interviewers to be reflective about their action. Some interviewing skills can be developed through practice, notably in the procedural and interpersonal domains, while learning to be reflective needs additional support. Hoover et al. discuss undergraduate learners' movement through three development stages from directed interviewer to guided interviewer and on to collegial interviewer.

Learning the art of qualitative interviewing through practice can involve the learner researcher in observation, simulation, and direct experience. Also important is reinforcement or feedback from instructors or peers encouraging them to reflect³.

Kara and Brooks (2020)⁴ tried using a comic, *Conversation with a Purpose*, to bridge the gap between classroom learning and practice for inexperienced researchers. This graphic resource illustrates the story of a novice researcher's first real-world interview raising issues such as the emotional aspects of interviewing and building rapport.

For teaching in-depth interviewing, Herron and Roulston (2021)⁵ discuss their use of interview excerpts and focus on the micro aspects of talk. Here tools from ethnomethodology and conversation analysis helped

students see the need to 'slow down' and 'dig deep'. The resources for this included archived collections and media and celebrity interviews.

What is the learning experience?

Students learning the art of qualitative interviewing may need help to recognise leading or closed questions or the assumptions present in the questions posed. Novice interviewers often make mistakes when asking follow-up questions. They struggle to ask clear and timely questions and to deal with the unexpected – such as opinions being voiced that they disagree with. Students have commented on how the teaching approaches described here helped them to reflect on how they may have over-prepared, asked too many questions, or neglected the human interaction element⁶.

Classroom practice when learning interview skills can lead students to focus on requirements for time limits and recordings, and to neglect aspects like enjoying the encounter. Through practice, reflection on practice, and detailed analysis, such as of interviews that did not go well, students learn that interviews are about being a good listener, remaining present while mentally planning ahead, being attentive, and not missing opportunities to follow up on key ideas⁶. Through working with interviews in their own research projects, they not only enhance their practical skills but also learn about design issues such as choice of language, time, place, and technology.

What is the developmental approach?

All the pedagogy described above is about fostering the development of the art of qualitative interviewing. One way to support this is to adopt an intentionally developmental approach. The developmental approach

described by Roulston and Herron^{6, 7} involves three stages:

1. Examining interviewers' practices
2. Conducting a class-based project involving the conduct of interviews on an instructor-initiated or class-selected topic, and
3. Developing a self-initiated interview project.

The first stage is led by the research methods educator who usually selects the interview excerpts for students to work on. These may be from popular media or archived research interviews. The educator's role is to guide the students such that they become able to:

- identify the contextual features of interviews (setting, editing, framing, people)
- identify the key features of the interview interaction (turn-taking, interruptions etc)
- analyse how interviewers pose questions and follow-up on interviewees' answers
- interpret the purpose and credibility of the interview
- identify potential ethical issues relative to the interview.

The second stage is about practice. Here the students conduct individual interviews using a guide developed by the educator or with the class, transcribe their interviews, conduct a peer review of the interviews, contribute to their analysis and interpretation, and present findings. The educator's role is to guide students so they become able to:

- describe how interview guides relate to research questions
- use an interview guide to conduct an interview
- transcribe interview data
- analyse interviewer questioning and follow-up responses
- assess the effectiveness of the interview for generating useful data
- analyse and interpret interview data for sharing verbally or in writing.

In the third stage, the students learn to develop and use their own interview guide, following the steps through to sharing findings. Here the additional goals are for students to be able to:

- analyse their contribution to the co-construction of interview data
- describe their subject positions relative to the interview project and participant
- assess their effectiveness

- identify ethical issues relative to the research project.

What does this pedagogy offer?

Readers will note that this pedagogy offers a relatively structured approach to developing basic interview skills before students begin experimenting with other interview styles. This aligns with the idea of Miller et al⁸, that learning starts with observing. This developmental approach is one approach where the level of guidance and scaffolding gradually reduces, and in which students can practice initially in low stakes contexts. This has been found to make the process of learning the art of interviewing more enjoyable. As they develop, students can relate their practical, embodied experiences to the theories and methods they meet in the literature.

Once students have mastered the art of conducting individual qualitative interviews, they can explore a variety of supplementary practices, such as object and photo elicitation, and mobile interviews, as well as dyadic and group interviewing. They can also explore the implications of using different modalities to conduct interviews – including asynchronous and synchronous online interviews, and working in augmented and virtual reality environments.

Useful links

<https://qualpage.com/resources-for-teaching>

[Bibliography of Interview Resources](#)

<https://helenkara.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/conversation-with-a-purpose.pdf>

Archived interviews:

<https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews>

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National Centre for Research Methods
 Social Sciences
 University of Southampton
 Southampton, SO17 1BJ
 United Kingdom.

Web <http://www.ncrm.ac.uk>
Email info@ncrm.ac.uk?
Tel +44 23 8059 4539
X @NCRMUK