

Erica McAteer
University of Glasgow.

"Interviews are conversations where the outcome is a coproduction of the interviewer and the interviewee" Kvale (1996).

Uses

There are a number of approaches to interviewing, which have in common the need to get perspectives on the evaluation targets from a sample of 'users' representing different stakeholder groups.

- ◆ The standardised, open ended interview

Strength: makes sure questions are asked in the same way across a sample population by different interviewers.

Weakness: risk losing important, unanticipated, information.

- ◆ The guided or structured interview

Strength: keeps interaction focused, covering same ground with respondent sets, while allowing individual experience to emerge.

Weakness: cannot divert far, or long, from agenda without losing part of 'the story'.

- ◆ The informal, conversational interview

Strength: allows the evaluator to respond quickly to individual differences and situational changes.

Weakness: a great deal of time is needed to get systematic information.

Like Focus Groups, interviews can be useful for formative/developmental or summative/retrospective evaluation.

Process

1. Define your population sample

Who (and how many) will you interview?

2. Identify the target interview issues

List them by 'theme' if possible.

3. Design your study

Think of how to approach interviewees, the conduct of the interview itself and allow time for post-interview feedback.

4. Produce an interview script

Broad cues for a conversational approach, guide-list for a structured interview, questions for a standardised 'open interview'.

There are several sorts of questions that can usefully be asked, and Patton (1996) suggests that these should if possible be sequenced in the following way: behaviour/experience questions; opinion/value questions; feeling questions; knowledge questions; sensory questions; demographic/background questions.

5. Pilot the interviews

Use a small subset (at least two) representatives of the different populations involved. This is an often skipped but absolutely essential step!

Asking exactly the same questions of very different groups can be very useful, particularly when a development has to meet circumstances of need so far as teacher, learner and institution is concerned – but it is not always appropriate to predict the answers will be different!

6. Conduct the interviews

Write up a short note after each episode, including anything that stood out, went amiss, etc. just logging general procedure.

Probes, follow-up questions, clarification requests can be made as and when necessary, taking care to maintain a light, interested touch or you might stem the flow.

7. Transcribe responses and organise in best way for analysis

This can mean tagging 'rich' text responses to secure context information (respondent details, intervention details, schedule details) and storing responses under issue/question headings for whatever level of content analysis is appropriate. It can mean providing for 'response profiles' from individual participants. It is quite likely that both orientations will be necessary.

Typing each interview response into a spreadsheet with the individual case as a row with columns holding demographic information, respondent factors etc. having one column for each open question is a good way of holding the data safe. Printouts of individual columns with all the text responses can then be coded and this information entered into a duplicate file. Excel 7 allows word-wrap for quite lengthy responses!

If you can, check back with interviewees to obtain elaboration, further comment, confirmation (or refutation!) of your interpretation of their meanings.

8. Analyse outcomes

Remember that this technique gives qualitative data! Even if it has been possible to code responses such that descriptive statistics are possible and useful, any further analysis has to be very carefully conducted, using 'non-parametric' tests.

9. Interpret findings

Integrate with other outcomes from other methods used.

Report your recommendations.

Variations

Phone interviews, where the interviewer fills in the responses as they come over the wire – still allows prompting and 'real-time' interaction.

Online interviews, either using Web-forms or just through email. Here some structure is essential with an introductory paragraph if agreement not already obtained before sending. What is lost in 'immediacy' might be balanced by 'reflection', with a two-shot message circulating feedback and seeking further comments.

Tape interviews (Lockwood) – sometimes useful to use different methods with exactly the same questions as the responses do differ for different modes.

Self-recorded audio taped interviews, where the respondent is sent a list of questions or issues and asked to record responses at a suitable time (perhaps at the end of a course of study) is an unusual, but workable, alternative.

The above, and the obvious corollary of the 'paper interview' shows that the line between interviews and open questionnaires blurs at the edges...

Other Relevant Pages

Recipes

- Questionnaires
- Checklists
- Designing, experiments
- Trials
- Focus groups

Information Pages

- Transcribing
- Interviewing
- Student sample
- Pedagogic toolkit
- Isolation or integration
- Working with groups

Serving suggestions

References