Research Interviews in the
Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

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Abstract:

Research interviews provide a useful approach for teams/individuals conducting SoTL research in multidisciplinary higher education settings. This paper will address the value of research interviews for SoTL research, methods of qualitative research interviews, and the challenges associated with conducting research interviews in SoTL projects.

Key Words:

research interviews, scholarship of teaching and learning.

Introduction

Research in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) is distinctive and shaped by the SoTL scholars who bring diverse disciplinary cultures into research on educative experiences (Hubball & Clarke, 2010). Individuals and teams conducting SoTL research in multidisciplinary higher education contexts work to straddle the gap between pedagogical development and pedagogical research. One of the defining features of their research is the opportunity to combine conventional educational research methodologies with disciplinary expertise (D'Andrea, 2006; Stierer & Antoniou, 2004). SoTL research necessitates an "eclectic approach that utilizes the multiplicity of approaches available from all subject fields" (D'Andrea, 2006, p. 93) and to support investigations that respond to complex questions. Within higher education research, there is a strong presence of qualitative research methodologies, with interviews, surveys, and documentary analysis greatly outnumbering other forms of data collection (Hubball & Clarke, 2010). This paper will argue for the place of research interviews, and specifically the semi-structured interview, as integral to SoTL research.

Underpinnings of SoTL Research

Traditionally, SoTL research is pursued as a type of practitioner research; by instructors in their own classrooms, motivated by a desire to understand teaching practices and to improve the quality of student learning within a specific learning context (Huber, 2006; Prosser, 2008; Stierer & Antoniou, 2004). Now, individuals and teams conducting SoTL research in multidisciplinary higher education settings, require methodological pluralism. Teaching and learning are complex processes and no single source or type of evidence can provide a sufficient window to the difficult questions raised around curriculum and pedagogy. SoTL researchers need to find methodologies and methods, which represent "a synthesis of an educational research tradition (practitioner research) with a disciplinary tradition (design-based research)" (Sharma & McShane, 2008, p. 267); being responsive to multidisciplinary educational contexts and disciplinary audiences.

Currently, qualitative research is interested with contested meanings, controversies, and new forms of research; providing freedom from the confines of a single way of seeing the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As all truths are limited and incomplete, there is no single paradigm to which all social science researchers must ascribe. The qualitative research interview in particular, provides a productive frame for SoTL research as it attempts to understand the world from the participant's point of view (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) while accepting methodological flexibility and using it to further productive educational research. Yet, while SoTL research is context based, interpretive, and flexible, it is not free of values (Hubball & Clarke, 2010). Active researchers cannot act as neutral and external spectators in knowledge construction, nor can they claim privilege of interpretation. The qualitative research interview attempts to create knowledge, not through an observational understanding, but a subjective understanding of experience (Seidman, 2008) through interaction between interviewer and interviewee. All participants are engaged in knowledge production during the interview (Koro-Ljungberg, 2008), implying a shared authority and ownership over the interview data.

Benefits of the Research Interview

Many SoTL researchers, who are experts in their own discipline and research practices, are inexperienced and tentative in pedagogical research (MacLean & Poole, 2010; Stierer & Antoniou, 2004). Therefore, novice SoTL scholars may select approaches familiar to their discipline in order to conduct their research. Yet, these disciplinary methodologies may not produce rich results for complex SoTL research questions (Hubball & Clarke, 2010; Huber, 2006). The research interview provides a flexible, dynamic method of placing participants at the heart of the research.

Interviews are an attempt to understand the complex behavior of members of a society (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Inherent in qualitative interviewing is "an interest in the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" because those narratives are seen to be of value (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). Research interviews can have many purposes and take many forms, but ultimately when conducting research in SoTL, there is a need for rigorous, scholarly interviews focused on the lived experience of participants. The researcher is able to combine contextually

observed behaviors with participant's subjective experience in order to elucidate an understanding of multifaceted teaching and learning environments.

Conversation may be thought of as a basic mode of knowing an other person (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009) therefore, narrative forms of research serve to include participants where theoretical research may exclude (Bowman, 2006). In this context, the research interview is a knowledge producing activity (Thomas, 2011) and most of the knowledge produced is about people's desires and opinions (von Glasersfeld, 1989). As such, research interviews are concerned with the interpretive comprehension of participants' perceptions (Smythe & Murray, 2000). This is useful to SoTL scholars as the research interview can "support and engage the lived experience of curricular stakeholders" (Hubball, Pearson, & Clarke, 2013, p. 44), thereby including them in the knowledge production.

The research interview offers SoTL projects a unique window into the understanding of participants. Seidman (2006) notes, "the primary way a researcher can investigate an educational organization, institution, or process is through the experience of the individual people" (p. 10) as meaning making is explored through the interview. As such, interviews provide a method through which researchers come to know their participants. Interviews reinforce the value of interpersonal connections between parties (Gunzenhauser, 2006; Rubin & Rubin, 2005); highlighting the value of the spoken word as participants create themselves through speech. Seeing as each of the participants may have differing experiences and insights, the research interview does not produce a generalizable truth, rather a snapshot of the meanings, intentions, and motivations behind what is said, seen, or observed.

Research interviews can be used in SoTL to examine experience, generate knowledge through a reciprocal relationship, and maximize the richness of the data through broad inclusion criteria within an adaptable framework. The goal of the interview is to examine how participants and researchers understand aspects of their lives (Koro-Ljungberg, 2008); not by mining the experience of an interviewee, but temporarily constructing a shared encounter. Therefore, the interviewer is implicated in the creation of meanings through the social circumstances of the interview (Charmaz, 2008); often conducting some interviews, beginning surface analysis, and then conducting more interviews to explore emerging questions.

Overview of Interviews

Research in the scholarship of teaching and learning demands critical thinking about how researchers gather and analyze data. It begins with a question being asked. The challenge lies in how best to employ a set of methods and the best sources of evidence to explore these questions in ways that will be credible, authentic, and significant. While each research question could be approached from a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods perspective, depending on the methodological approach of the researcher, interviews generate, what Clifford Geertz (1973) calls, "thick description" (as cited in Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 13).

When conducting research into the experience of others, different types of interviews can contribute conceptual and theoretical knowledge to different types of research

questions. Interviews are generally categorized into three forms; structured, unstructured, and semi-structured. The frame selected for the interview will determine the key knowledge elicited, however the goal is to generate depth of understanding within a flexible research design.

Structured interviews have been used to test a priori hypotheses (those thought to be true in advance of evidence) using standardized questions and methods of analysis. Questions are frequently scripted (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) to ensure consistency and the interviewer does not interpret the questions or engage with the responses. A predetermined coding scheme is used and the interviewer generally controls the pace of the interview. The structured interview is quick and efficient at eliciting responses, but it is bereft of an emotional dimension making it hard for the researcher to capture the emotional aspects of lived experience. As a result, it is possible to gather information that is skewed by a respondent's desire to please the interviewer, with either a desirable response or an omission.

In contrast, the *unstructured interview* is traditionally open-ended and in-depth (Fontana & Frey, 2005). The respondent is asked a broad question and the interviewer remains as a listener, only requesting clarification, if necessary. Often taking the form of extended narratives (Reissman, 2008), unstructured interviews necessitate a long-standing, meaningful connection between the participants and the researcher. Creating not only an empathetic interaction, but also a deeper awareness of patterns of speech and conversational style in order to hear the qualitative differences and be attuned to silences. However, the long term commitment to a single or small group of participants may not be conducive to the scope of the SoTL research.

For SoTL research, the most valuable form of interview is the *semi-structured interview* (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). It focuses on a narrow range of topics in order to learn about them in detail. The careful, creative use of probing questions provides more depth and detail, while follow up questions can be used to achieve richness through the exploration of key words, ideas, and themes (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The semi-structured interview has to be well designed in order to facilitate depth over breadth. This challenging format requires preparation, discipline, improvisation, creativity, and significant time for analysis and interpretation.

Emphasizing the active role of the "conversational partner" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 14) in shaping the discussion and guiding the research, the semi-structured interview is focused on a co-operative engagement between researcher and participant; with the interviewer exploring and building upon each response. As each participant is different, the semi-structured interview highlights the unique knowledge and interaction within the interview. This emphasizes the importance of developing and using an interview protocol to provide the undergirding of a responsive interview. While the researcher will prepare with a central research interest or area, the interview will be dynamic; with questions customized to topics the participant knows and is comfortable discussing. This method of interview uses the skill of the interviewer and their interpersonal connection to the participant in order to investigate specific aspects of the participant's experience.

Challenges of the Research Interview

Power is a pivotal concern in qualitative research from recruitment to dissemination. It is paramount that we be fair to our participants with every decision we make regarding their educational experiences (Flinders, 1992; MacLean & Poole, 2010); using ethical procedures to gain trust, establish a rapport, and collect information that is relevant to the research project. The common perception of interviews as positive and empowering dialogues has been called into question (Kvale, 2006) due to the power imbalance between researcher and participant. The embedded researcher conducting interviews on their practice creates an asymmetrical power relationship and a similar tension exists between the desire to encourage learners to take the time to participate in a research project, without creating social penalties for choosing not to participate (MacLean & Poole, 2010). Understanding the interview as a partnership is important to mitigate the imbalance of power. The interviewer and interviewee form a bond that generates ethical obligations for the researcher (Rubin & Rubin, 2005); addressing power through relationship.

In addition, informed consent may be problematic, when conducting unstructured and semi-structured interviews, due to the open-ended, and often ongoing, nature of the interview. Both the interviewer and the interviewee have a limited understanding of what they are actually consenting to. As the research interviews may continue over a length of time, privacy and anonymity become complicated as third parties often figure into personal narratives; especially when considering the complex and collaborative lived experience of educational environments. Smythe and Murray (2000) recommend on-going process consent through which interviewers continue to seek participant's informed consent. The on-going process consent allows the participant to retain ownership of their data and the researcher to corroborate findings through member check procedures; providing an opportunity for participants to affirm the themes developed by the researcher or the transcript of their interviews.

Questions of the quality and reliability of research interviews have produced common objections around the lack of scientific reliability, the methods of research, and generalizability of findings (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). Rather than focus on concerns that the interviewer affects the process, qualitative research interviews celebrate the fact that the interviewer is an "adaptable, flexible instrument" who can respond to varying situations (Seidman, 2008, p. 23). The notion of gathering objective data from an interview is mistaken as the interview is inextricably tied with the context of its production; "[i]nterviewers are part of the interviewing picture" regardless of how diligently they work at minimizing their effect (Seidman, 2008, p. 22). The meaning made from an interview is a product of the interaction between participant and interviewer. In order to make a knowledge claim based on an interview, the data does not have to be objective, but it does have to be empirically supported.

The embedded nature of researchers within the interview highlights the challenge of the researcher's multiple roles. In SoTL research, it is likely that the researcher will also be a member of an instructional team or staff member within the institution. Instructors must recognize their dual roles when acting as a scholar of teaching and learning; the researcher and instructor may be the same person. This insider knowledge could provide invaluable insights, including familiarity with the language and culture of the

participants within the learning environment, yet, it is important to be cognizant of taking liberties and making assumptions based on a familiarity with the participants. Acknowledging a researcher's subjectivity is foundational to the tradition of practitioner research (Charmaz & Mitchell, 1996). Interviewers must recognize that they are hardly neutral tools; they carry with them their own socio-historical baggage that present themselves as assumptions, expectations, and biases.

Qualitative research interviews are less concerned with generalizability and more with trustworthy and authentic representation of the participants' perspectives (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). The credibility of this research is demonstrated, in part, through evidence (i.e. use of the participants' words or quotations from transcripts), as detailed substantiation from participants provides an insiders' view of lived experience (Charmaz & Mitchell, 1996). The reliability of the interview data is also supported by drawing attention to silences (Mazzei, 2007), including the author's voice, and utilizing reflexive commentary as supplementary data for analysis; enhancing the triangulation of the research data. Through transparency in ethics, data collection, and analysis, SoTL projects will sincerely reflect the co-construction of knowledge through the research interview.

Conclusion

The interview is an invaluable part of the research project, as long as researchers remain attentive to the potential challenges and pitfalls. The capacity in the research interview is its privileged access into the world of the interviewee and its explorative potential far outweighs the challenges.

In diverse SoTL contexts, the research interview asks researchers to engage participants as active contributors rather than passive subjects in research. This does not mean reifying their voices; it suggests that the research interview can form a method of substantiating or contesting the rich, complex data of the research. While we recognize the subjectivity of any research project, choosing research interviews for data collection hopes to gain a rich understanding of the complex meanings participants attribute to their experience and how they construct these meanings.

Higher education research should aim to improve practice through description, analysis, and new conceptualizations (D'Andrea, 2006). In the case of SoTL research projects, this involves recognition that we need to conduct rigorous, scholarly research, while engaged in our pedagogical and curricular practice in multidisciplinary settings; acting as both insiders and outsiders in the research. It is the research interview, which will tap into the participants' unique experiences and reflections.

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