

Skill Toolkit

SIDEWAYS LEARNING

INTERVIEW

Interviews provide in-depth and detailed information on a topic or problem from the perspective of those who have experiences to share.

THE STORY

Jacqueline spent years as an educator watching secondary school students become increasingly involved with media. Television, film, radio, video games, cell phones, the internet, social networking websites, etc. all seemed to be a ubiquitous part of their personal lives. However, these media seemed suspiciously absent from school curricula. Classrooms were not equipped with computers and cell phones were banned from public schools and confiscated at the door. Parents and fellow teachers lamented that youth spent too much time in front of video games and television sets. Jacqueline wanted to better understand how teenagers in New York City used media and how it might inform teaching and learning in schools. She scheduled interviews with a few teens to put the question to them. At her first interview, she asked Milly, a 15-year old girl, “How do you use media?” The teen looked blankly back at her. “Um, I don’t know what you’re talking about. Media is just, like, life.”

The terms Jacqueline used to understand what she thought was obvious made no sense to this high schooler, nor to other teens that she interviewed. In order to find out what youth thought about media and how they used it, Jacqueline had to change the way she thought about the topic and how she framed her questions. Instead, she adapted to the way that this teenager talked and modified her initial question to “tell me about a typical day in your life.” As a result, the teens she interviewed couldn’t help but talk about media and the many tools, products and encounters that structured their daily lives. Milly described waking up and checking her phone for messages and status updates before doing anything else. She explained that her parents bought her a computer at age 11 to support schoolwork but it wasn’t until a friend gave her an old laptop a year later that she started enjoying it. She was finally able to make her own decisions about how much time to spend on the computer and what websites to visit. She talked about

the exhausting hours of the school day and how she played video games as a release from that pressure – a valuable time to just be herself.

Jacqueline's assumptions about how teenagers connected with media were wrong. The newly phrased question had the effect of subtly changing what she thought was important about media in schools. She started to see that teenagers were using media to develop their identities, to build relationships, and negotiate the challenges of becoming adult. Changing her interview question ultimately reshaped the research. Jacqueline realized that she needed young people to define what was important about their own lives as a way to design educational activities that supported them. So she invited Milly and other youth to be a part of a research team to interview teenagers about their lives.

◀ For more information

For more information about Jacqueline's research search

<http://udini.proquest.com>

Simmons, J. (2010). Teenagers and media, "it's just life": Pedagogical possibilities in collaborative research with youth. Unpublished dissertation. Teachers College, Columbia University.

DESCRIPTION

An interview is a structured conversation between two people used to gain in depth understanding of situations and issues. Interviews are useful when there is a lot of information to learn, and when it's important to understand connections between people and problems from an individual's standpoint, position, or role in a community. A one-on-one conversation is also an efficient way to verify information, especially when there are differences of opinion and/or controversy. Focus group interviews may be effective for collecting and understanding a number of people's experiences and perspectives at one time. Ideal focus groups consist of 4 – 6 people.

A good interview is a conversation. The person asking the questions is interested in learning the interviewee's perspectives and interpretations on certain topics. However, the most productive interview situations do not simply involve a series of questions and answers. Interviews can be more casual with no pre-determined order for questions and no attempt to record the conversation. These interviews "go with the flow" while still revealing information about a topic of interest. More formal interviews are structured with a written list of questions and a device to record the conversation so that it can be reviewed in detail. In either situation, there is no recipe for an effective conversation. The interviewer must listen closely, be engaged with the ideas, and move from question to question with real interest and focus. Skilled interviewers seek clarity and know how to adjust questions as needed, how to ask follow-up questions in order to clarify ideas that are not understood, or sometimes remain silent to encourage further explanation. The interviewer's attitude, language, and behavior demonstrate a genuine interest in the other person and this usually can influence the interviewee's responses.

DEVELOPING AN INNOVATION MINDSET

Interviewees can provide a great deal of information about a topic but they can also quickly challenge assumptions you've made about the issues.

HOW TO

Step 1

Interview questions

Decide what information is needed and consider the different people who can provide that information. Then develop a short list of questions to help guide the conversation. It is very important to avoid leading questions that assume a certain kind of response and could therefore influence the tone of the conversation. Instead focus on “grand tour” questions (Spradley, 1979), which are often not even worded as questions. Instead these are broad, open-ended invitations to discuss a portion of one’s experience. This encourages the speaker to go in any direction and define the more specific issues that are important to the topic. This also might reveal the underlying assumptions and beliefs that might be more challenging to share if asked about directly.

Begin such questions with:

- Tell me about...
- Take me through...
- Describe...

(Ex. When interviewing an unemployed teen, one might ask, “Take me through a typical day,” or “Tell me about the last job you held,” or “Describe what a job search is like for you”. In describing these experiences you may learn about problems related to youth unemployment, which may be your real area of interest.)

Use these related skills: [Question](#), [Survey](#)

Step 2

Interview setting

When selecting an interview location, consider comfort and quiet. Hold the interview in a place with few potential distractions or interruptions. If the interviewee prefers to remain anonymous, then meet in a place where neither person is likely to be recognized. Remember that while a private residence can be quiet, it may not be comfortable for all participants. Discreet public spaces such as a quiet café or library are ideal.

Manage time well and always stick to the agreed-upon time frame. If an interview is scheduled to last 30 minutes, do not extend it to 60 minutes. It may seem tempting to follow up interesting responses endlessly, but respecting time is an important aspect of building rapport and mutual exchange. Request a follow-up interview if additional information is needed.

Use these related skills: [Space](#)

◀ Back to the story

Jacqueline’s initial question assumed a certain kind of response. She expected Milly to list the various devices and technologies that were relevant to her daily life. Jacqueline’s assumption that media was a primary part of teens’ lives didn’t leave room for her interviewees to define for themselves what they found important. When Jacqueline rephrased the question to “Tell me about a typical day in your life” she learned that teens use media to make sense of their lives, to determine who they want to be, and how to relate to others.

◀ Back to the story

Jacqueline met Milly in a local fast food restaurant that had spacious seating in a separate upstairs section. This allowed them to sit away from the noise of people entering or leaving the establishment. They chose a quiet corner far away from other patrons who might distract them. It was also quiet enough that Jacqueline could record their conversation. After the allotted time, Jacqueline had more questions, but instead of extending the interview she asked Milly if she would meet again for a follow-up conversation.

Step 3

Interview analysis

Write up your notes about the interview as soon as possible while the details are fresh. Include comments about pauses, laughter, any emotions tied to responses, etc. Record any initial hunches about what you think the interview means. Identify themes – any repeated words, phrases, or topics that get repeated or topics that you think are ignored. Explore these themes as you review your notes. If the interview was recorded, listen to the recording and transcribe segments that relate to these themes.

Write a summary or a vignette to describe the interviewee and his/her perspective along with prominent details of his/her experiences that reflect the themes that resonate. Use this analysis to inform what you know about the topic or issue of interest.

Ask questions such as:

- What themes were central in this interview?
- What is contradictory or inconclusive in the interview?
- What do I want to know more about?

Use these related skills: [Cross Sector Analysis](#), [Data Analysis](#)

LIMITATIONS

- Interviews can be time-consuming and require preparation and analysis after the face-to-face exchange.

RESOURCES

- **IDEO (Hear)**

This toolkit will help users design surveys by identifying who to speak to and how to ask questions.

<http://www.ideo.com/work/human-centered-design-toolkit/>

◀ Back to the story

After reviewing interviews with several teenagers, Jacqueline noticed that when talking about their lives, teens inevitably talked about their relationships with friends. And when talking about relationships with peers they inevitably talked about using cell phones to stay in touch. Some teens described feeling lost and disconnected from their communities without a cell phone. Several students were from low-income families and while the majority owned personal phones, because of the high cost they were more likely to have limited access to consistent cell phone time. During those times, they tended to rely on social networking sites to stay in touch. Jacqueline used this analysis to suggest that engaging youth communities should take into account on-line, networked, and in person interaction as an equity issue.

◀ Back to the story

Milly was interested in hearing the recording of their first conversation so Jacqueline agreed to transcribe the interview and bring a copy to their next meeting. This required several hours of work, but Jacqueline felt it was important to honor Milly's request.

References

Marquardt, M. (2005). *Leading with questions: How leaders find the right solutions to knowing what to ask*. San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass.

Westley, F., Zimmerman, B. & Patton, M. Q. (2006). *Getting to maybe: How the world is changed*. Vintage Canada.

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