

of facilitating a conversation, rather than only a sequential question-and-response interview, is increased. Depending on the characteristics of the participants, the e-researcher should use a writing style that is more conversational and friendly than academic.

Sample Welcome Message

Hello [first name of participant]:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. Further to my invitation letter, I would like to arrange a date to begin the interview. I was hoping we might begin Monday of next week (date), if this is convenient for you.

I have about five questions that I would like to ask, and I anticipate that the responses to these questions should not take longer than about 10 minutes each. I also thought we could cover one question every second day, but I am flexible and could make an alternate arrangement if this is inconvenient.

if you need to contact me other than by email, you can call me at [area code and phone number] during the day or [area code and phone number] during the evening. I look forward hearing from you!

Regards,

[first name of e-researcher]

We suggest that the questions should not be presented to participant at this point in the interview process. The rationale for this is that, typically, in unstructured and semi-structured interviews, the questions change based on earlier responses. As the interview progresses, for example, the e-researcher may wish to build on previous comments or rephrase questions so that they conform to the language of the participant. Moreover, during the interview,

the e-researcher may discover an unexpected area that needs further exploration and is extremely relevant and enlightening to the topic.

ASKING THE QUESTIONS

Asking good interview questions is considered to be an art, because getting meaningful answers is often difficult and depends to a great extent on the wording and tone of the questions. Fontana and Frey (1994) maintain that no matter how carefully we word the question(s), there is always a residue of ambiguity. This problem is magnified in text-based asynchronous interviews. One of the most effective ways of reducing this ambiguity is to use good questioning techniques, which in turn will enable the e-researcher to obtain more accurate information from the participants and garner useful

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and meaningful data. No matter how much effort the researcher puts into the questions, there is always the possibility of misinterpretation or misunderstanding by the participant. Thus, it is essential that the e-researcher create an atmosphere which participants are trusting and feel confident enough to seek clarification.

Once a friendly tone has been established through the welcome letter, it can be maintained by showing respect for the participant's opinions through supportive acknowledgments of his or her responses. For example, you could begin questioning with the following email:

Hello [first name of participant]:

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this study. I'd like

to begin with the following question:

How does e-learning affect the way you design and teach courses?

if you have any questions or need further clarification, please let me know through email or phone me collect at [area code and phone number].

Regards,

[first name of e-researcher]

Once the participant has responded to the question, feedback such as "Thank you for that last responses" acknowledges the response and indicates that you are attentive, interested, understanding, and respectful of what is being communicated. You should also ensure that the participant has finished sharing prior to moving on to the next question. Knowing when the participant is finished is trickier in a Net-based interview than in a face-to-face interview, due to the absence of nonverbal cues. The e-researcher should not assume that just because posting is sent that the participant has finished saying what needs to be said. For example, the time required to compose the message with the necessary explanation may be longer than the participant anticipated,

and, as such, may be cut short. Because the e-researcher cannot "see" what is happening, a follow-up message should always be sent asking "Do you have anything else to add?" or "Do you think there is anything else I should know about this?" If the participant has anything further to say, this will provide an opportunity to expand.

Once rapport and trust have been established, the e-researcher will need to focus on the questions. Obtaining accurate and meaningful information over the Net requires carefully worded and articulate questions. One way to reduce the residue of ambiguity is to use words that make sense to the participants. Cicourel (1964), who first wrote about this, noted that many meanings that may be clear to the researcher, may not make sense to participants. The main cause of this foible is that the researcher has not been sensitive to the participants' context and worldview. According to Kvale (1996), to reduce the communicative ambiguity, the questions should be easy to understand, short,

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and without jargon. This advice is especially important in text in text-based asynchronous environments where the ability to clarify is reduced. For example, the e-researcher may ask a question to which the participant provides a lengthy reply that completely misses the point of the question. In a face-to-face interview, the researcher will know early on by the response that the question has been misunderstood, and can quickly clarify the misunderstanding. The e-researcher can reduce the odds of misunderstanding and gather useful data by adhering to the following guidelines:

- Familiarize yourself with the language and culture of the target participants.
- Using the communication software, pilot the interview ques-

tion(s) to a few individuals (two or three) who have characteristics similar to (or the same as) the intended participants. Taking these actions prior to the interview will help identify problems with language usage and avoid a faux pas through insensitivity.

- Ask one question at a time.

This may seem like common sense. But patton (1987), for example, points out a mistake that interviewers often make—putting several questions together into one question (sometimes referred to as a double-barreled question). Responding to double-barreled questions can be quite difficult, if not impossible. Consider the following question:

This sample question illustrates three types of problems. First, it asks

two questions: (1) Do you agree that the Internet is a useful tool for data collection, and (2) do you think it is most useful as an information tool? Moreover, it might be difficult to answer if the participant does not feel that the Internet is useful as either a tool for data collection or as an information tool. Alternatively, the participant might feel that it is useful for both data collection and as an information tool. Hence, the participant might have difficulty answering this question given that there are two questions and an indication that an "either/or" response must be made between the two.

The second problem with this question is that it is not an open-ended question. Questions that begin with "*Do you*" or "*Would you*"

allow the participant to respond with "yes/no" statements and, as such, do not provide the researcher with much insight about why. A better question format for the semi-structured interview is open-ended. Questions beginning with "*What do you think about,*" "*Tell me your opinion about,*" or "*How do you feel about,*" allow the participants to respond in their own terms.

Finally, in the above sample, the questions are leading—particularly the first question. A question asking if someone "agrees" is value-laden. The e-researcher should be careful not to word questions as directive (with words such as *agree* or *dis-agree*) to guard against influencing the participant to respond in a certain way. A better way to word this question is:

What is your opinion about the usefulness of the Internet?