

Conversations and interviews



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Introduction

In this course, we will focus on learning about, and so developing, skills in using particular inquiry methods connected to conversations and interviews. There are many ways of distinguishing between different methods of gathering information. Look at any book on research methods and it'll have some subtle differences from another, so there is no single right way to approach this subject.

In this section 1 we will concentrate on asking people questions.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of level 2 study in [Business & Management](#).



Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand the various ways of gathering information by asking people questions
- understand how to decide between the different types of interview
- develop the skills needed for approaching different types of interviews.

1 Aims of this course

In this section, we will look at how questions are asked and the way in which they can shape the answer you're given.



1.1 Asking questions

At the heart of any inquiry is the activity of asking questions. In this section, I want us to think through the various ways that we can do this. I shall split it into different types:

1. Interviews
2. Conversations.

Definition: Respondent

For ease of writing, I will tend to use another unusual term in writing about interviews. A **respondent** is a person who is asked questions and whose answers are considered by an inquirer. It is significant that I have used this term rather than, say, informant or interviewee. The significance will become more apparent as we explore the different types of interviews and conversations you might undertake in your inquiry. Not all questions are answered by information – sometimes you will get opinions or feelings – and not all conversations are formal interviews with an interviewee, and so I'll use the one term respondent to capture all the people that you'll talk to during your inquiry.

1.1.1 How questions shape answers

So why do I split asking questions into these two types? Well, in answering that question I shall first deal with some crucial issues about the process of gathering information from other people. You see, the way you ask your questions will have a significant effect on the answers you're given. They will be affected by the context, the words you use and your tone.

The context affects the answer

A couple of examples will help make sense of this. First, imagine that you ask a senior colleague about a complex issue on her way to a meeting, for which she is already late. Do you think that she'll give the same answer as if you asked her the same question when she's winding down at the end of the week? Second, you want to ask a question about your firm's marketing strategy and its impact on operations; do you think you'd get a fair answer from the manufacturing director shortly after he's had a furious row with the sales and marketing director?

Now these examples are somewhat extreme, but they do illustrate the problem of choosing the best context to get answers that will help you develop successful practice. So how can you make a wise decision about where and when to ask someone your questions? Here are five questions that might help you decide.

1. **Do you have many or only a few (perhaps one) questions to ask?**

This is a simple point; if you only have one quick question to ask then obviously it won't be necessary to organise a formal interview. Just seek an appropriate moment to ask your question. If, however, you have a series of related questions then this will probably need a fixed period of time when you won't be interrupted.

2. **Does your question require a considered or spontaneous answer?**

Some questions will require your respondent to think carefully; perhaps you are asking her to make a judgement or evaluate some piece of information. On the other hand, sometimes you will want a spontaneous answer, one that hasn't been thought about for too long. Of course, you have to be careful with questions of the latter sort; are you being fair to your respondent in not giving them time to think?

3. **Does your respondent have time available for an extended conversation or would they appreciate a very brief conversation?**

Before now, I have got halfway through a series of questions with a colleague when I noticed them looking at their watch and displaying an increasing desire to be

somewhere else. Such a situation does not bode well for the quality of the answers that you'll get!

4. **Is the answer to your question likely to be of a sensitive or confidential nature?**

An extreme example of this would be 'What do you think of Joe's chance of promotion?', just as Joe was standing next to you. Do you think that the answer might be affected by Joe's presence?



Figure 1 What I'm about to tell you is extremely confidential, Ravenhurst ... I want you to promise me that you'll keep it under your hat.'

5. **What is your relationship with the respondent?**

Are you asking a question of a friend, your boss, a stranger or a subordinate? Each is likely to answer your question differently. Your friend might well try to think what answer would help you. An older, more senior colleague might shape her answer so as to give you advice or she might dismiss the question with a cursory answer. A subordinate might want to please you or be worried about how their answer might affect them.

Each of these questions will help you consider how your respondent's answers might be affected by the context in which you talk with them. As you think those issues through you will then work out the best way to tackle the conversation with your respondent. Of course, there are times when you can't organise events in the best possible way and you will have to be satisfied with a less than perfect 'interview'. There are two points to consider when this happens. First, it becomes really important in such situations to keep a good record of what happened and what you think might have affected the answer you were given. Second, as you make sense of what your respondent has said, you will need to consider how the context affected his or her answer.

Your words will affect the answer

How you ask your questions will have an effect on the answers given.

Activity 1 Leading and closed questions

5 minutes(s)

Take a look at Box 1, which is a scene from the 1980s satire, *Yes, Prime Minister*. Notice how the nature of the questions Sir Humphrey asks pushes Bernard towards the final answer that he wants. These are called leading questions. Also notice how the questions require a simple yes or no answer; these are called closed questions.

Sir Humphrey You know what happens: nice young lady comes up to you. Obviously you want to create a good impression, you don't want to look a fool, do you? So she starts asking you some questions: Mr. Woolley, are you worried about the number of young people without jobs?

Bernard Yes.

SH Are you worried about the rise in crime among teenagers?

B Yes.

SH Do you think there is a lack of discipline in our Comprehensive schools?

B Yes.

SH Do you think young people welcome some authority and leadership in their lives?

B Yes.

SH Do you think they respond to a challenge?

B Yes.

SH Would you be in favour of reintroducing National Service?

B Oh ... well, I suppose I might be.

SH Yes or no?

B Yes.

SH Of course you would, Bernard. After all you've been told you can't say no to that. So they don't mention the first five questions and they publish the last one.

B Is that really what they do?

SH Well, not the reputable ones, no, but there aren't many of those. So alternatively the young lady can get the opposite result.

B How?

SH Mr. Woolley, are you worried about the danger of war?

B Yes.

SH Are you worried about the growth of armaments?

B Yes.

SH Do you think there is a danger in giving young people guns and teaching them how to kill?

B Yes.

SH Do you think it is wrong to force people to take up arms against their will?

B Yes.

SH Would you oppose the reintroduction of National Service?

B Yes.

SH There you are, you see, Bernard. The perfect balanced sample.

(Source: *Yes, Prime Minister*, 1986)

Now, as a general piece of advice, you should avoid asking leading questions unless, like Sir Humphrey, you want to make a point and so get something done. Even then, it's probably unwise and it certainly is likely to provide you with information of a very doubtful quality. Closed questions can also be problematic. There are some occasions, especially in questionnaires and surveys, where closed questions are necessary; for example, you

might want to know if a colleague was at a particular meeting. However, in a practice-centred inquiry, you are often looking for information from people you will be working with and open questions give a respondent more opportunity to shape the answers she gives. There may be a benefit in this as it will give you a deeper sense of how this colleague will co-ordinate with you as you take action. I'll say more about this aspect of asking questions in the section on interviews below. The point I want to make here, however, is that the way you ask questions will shape the answers you get and you will need to think very carefully about your questions, either before you ask them or later as you try to make sense of the answers.

Your tone will affect the answer

In addition to the particular words you use, your tone of voice will affect the answers that you are given.

Activity 2 Tone of voice

5 minutes(s)

Consider the following question: 'You wouldn't argue with the boss, would you?' This same question could be asked in very different tones of voice, for example:

- In a threatening voice by a senior manager
- In a voice of 'wide-eyed' shock and awe
- In a matter-of-fact voice by a market researcher.

What do you think the answer would be to each tone of voice?

Comment

Here again the relationship between the questioner and respondent is crucial to how the question is understood by the respondent. I suspect that you can identify somewhat different answers to the same question!

1.1.2 When good enough is better than perfect

So, how can you handle these complications? (To be honest, I've only touched on some of the ways in which we can affect the answers our respondents give us.) It is tempting to think that we must aim for some sort of perfection in our interviewing techniques and, indeed, some books on research methods appear to aim for that goal. In a practice-centred inquiry, however, perfect interview technique is less important than getting timely and relevant information. So, for example, waiting a week for the perfect context for a formal interview with a senior colleague might well mean that important and urgent action is delayed unhelpfully. There is a real possibility that aspiring for the 'perfect' will obstruct you in achieving a 'good enough' result. I'll say more about how to achieve good quality inquiry later, but for now, as you undertake a practice-centred inquiry, you will need to judge whether the upside of getting quick information is worth the downside of that information being flawed. This is one of those areas where keeping good field notes is vital, for you can record your sense that a colleague's comment might have been influenced by the way you asked the question.

1.2 Interviews

Let's first consider those times when you will set up an interview, in contrast to those times when you grab a quick word with a colleague and ask them an important question. For in looking at these more formal interviews, we can see how you might deal with some of the 'problems' that we've identified above and then, later, we can see if we can use any of these ideas to help with the informal, chance conversations that are likely to be an important part of any practice-centred inquiry.



Figure 2 “Jim had a meeting with the big cheese.”

1.2.1 The four stages of an interview

An interview is likely to go through four stages:

-
- | | |
|-----------------|--|
| 1. Introduction | In this stage you need to explain what the topic of the interview is and possibly why you are conducting the interview with that particular person. You have to be careful at this stage that your introduction doesn't give too much of a steer to your respondent. Imagine starting off an interview with the sentence, 'I want to find out what's going wrong with the students and how badly the books are affecting them.' Well, that introduction has probably stopped a series of other topics from being discussed. So your introduction has to be carefully thought about. It needs to be clear enough to interest your respondent but be careful that it does not become leading, in suggesting the kind of answers that you want. |
| 2. The schedule | All interviews will have some sort of schedule of questions. As I suggest below, there are differences in how detailed that schedule will be. Sometimes you'll have a carefully worded list of questions. On other occasions you'll have only a list of general topics you want to discuss. |
| 3. A summary | It's often a good idea at the end of the interview to summarise what you have learned from it; indeed, you might do this on a couple of occasions during the interview as well. At such points you outline what you have understood to have been said. This will give your respondent the opportunity to correct any misunderstandings. |
| 4. The end | This may sound trivial, but do end by thanking your respondent for giving you their time, and do make sure that you end on time. If you have said that the interview will only take fifteen minutes or half an hour, then be ready to end at that time. I have often found that once they get onto a topic, people will give you more time, even when they are very busy; but you must never presume upon that and you must be sensitive to the need to end an interview at the convenience of your respondent. |
-

1.2.2 Types of interview

A common way to look at interviewing people is to distinguish between structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews. None of them is *best* and none of them is without problems, so your decision on how to design an interview will always be a matter of judgement. We'll think about how you make that judgement in a moment, but first we'll describe each interview in a little more detail. I would want to stress, however, that there are not three, *distinct* types of interview: structured, unstructured or semi-structured. Rather, these different types of interview are on a continuum (see Figure 3) and you will find yourself making quite fine judgements as to whether you want to be *more* structured or *less* structured in your interviewing technique.

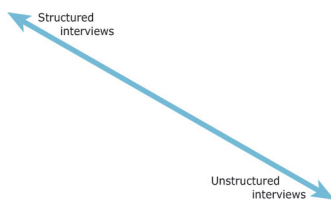


Figure 3 The interview continuum

Structured interviews

In a structured interview you will have a set schedule of questions from which you will not deviate. Indeed, at the most structured end of this type of interview, you will detail the very wording of each question. So for a structured interview you will go through several stages of preparation:

1. Work out an overview of what sort of information you want to gather and who you will be interviewing.
2. Design the questions that you will want to ask, taking care to make your wording clear so that it can't be misunderstood. You'll also try to be careful to ask questions that are sensitive to your interviewees.
3. Work out the best and most logical order for your questions. You want to avoid jumping from one topic to another during an interview. If you have several questions on the same, similar or related topics, then put them together as that will help your respondent to think through the topic or remember details of an incident.
4. Pilot your question schedule, looking for questions that puzzle your respondents, lead to digressions or cause you any difficulties.

There are several benefits to preparing and piloting structured interviews in this way:

- This level of preparation may well help you word your questions sensitively...
- ... and will help you ensure that you don't ask leading questions and that you avoid any bias in your questions.
- As you undertake a couple of pilot interviews you will get a very clear indication of how successful the interviews will be. This will help you adjust and improve the wording and order of your questions, giving you a better chance of conducting a consistent and good set of interviews.

Researcher's experience: Jon Billsberry gives this important advice from his experience of conducting interviews.

'One thing I always try to do is to pilot my questionnaires. I do this in two ways. First, I ask a few people to complete it to tell me if the questions make sense, whether there are any spelling mistakes, and to check the instructions. I guess everyone does this. But I do a second check as well. I imagine that fifty or so people have completed the questionnaire and I put numbers and words into my spreadsheet to mimic what the results could look like. I then imagine that I am writing up my report and try to incorporate data. As I do this, it makes me think about what the questions are really asking and what conclusions I can draw from them. It also tells me what sort of analysis I can do. I do this because in my early years as a researcher I found that I got people to complete my surveys and then found errors and problems that defied analysis.'

Unstructured interviews

At the opposite end of the structure continuum are completely unstructured interviews.

So how do you go about an unstructured interview? Well, I've found that there are two elements of a successful interview. First, you have to provide a **hook**; a theme or topic that interests your respondent. I have bad memories of times when I tried to interview someone about a topic that bored them! This hook has to be specific enough for the respondent to recognise its importance and its relevance to them. So, for example, it's unlikely that a sales manager would understand why she's being interviewed about the details of factory policy, but she might have something to say about how factory efficiency affects her sales success. Similarly, details of how a hospital recruits cleaning staff might not be very important to a consultant surgeon, but I bet that she'll consider the cleanliness of the wards and operating theatres to be very important. You therefore need to choose your respondents carefully so that they'll have something to say about a topic you're interested in, and then you'll have to describe that topic in a way that hooks your respondent into the interview. This might mean that you word the introduction to your interview slightly differently for each respondent.

Researcher's experience: Caroline Ramsey explains why she tends to use completely unstructured interviews.

'I guess that when I'm working with organisations, my particular interest is in finding out how people talk in that organisation, what sort of things are important to them and how they distinguish good from bad or successful from unsuccessful. So I'm possibly less interested in the topic they are actually talking about and more interested in their manner of talk. As a consequence, I want my respondents to choose what they talk about and how they talk about it. Unstructured interviews, often involving me asking managers to tell me stories of important incidents, are really helpful as I try to co-ordinate with members of an organisation.'

Second, you'll need to establish a **rhythm** to your interview. I use the term rhythm to capture the sense in which unstructured interviews are different from structured interviews. In a structured interview, you will have a carefully planned and organised

schedule of questions. That won't be the case in unstructured interviews, but you will need some method of encouraging your respondent to talk and of helping them focus on the main theme of the interview. How can you do this without a set sequence of questions? Here are three possible rhythms that you might use. They are only examples and you might find that you develop one of your own that fits better with your own working context. Having introduced the general theme of the interview:

- Ask what the key issues are, or what have been the significant events. Then ask for **stories** that illustrate that issue or event.
- Ask how your respondent would evaluate the current situation or past events, or what they think will happen. Here you are asking for their **opinions**.
- Or you could ask about their **feelings** about how a situation or project is progressing.

In each case, you are asking open questions that seek to encourage your respondent to talk freely, with as little direction from you as possible.

Definition: Open and closed questions

You can ask questions that have one right answer. For example, you could ask if it rained on Tuesday. The answer is either yes or no. Similarly, in asking: 'What was our sales volume in August?', you will expect one answer. These are **closed** questions. On the other hand, you might ask if the rain is likely to be heavy enough on Tuesday to stop us going jogging or you could ask the sales manager why sales had fallen during August. These questions would be **open** questions because they do not have a correct answer; rather they will elicit a more free-flowing response.

Semi-structured

As the name implies, a semi-structured interview has some of the characteristics of both the structured and unstructured interview. There is no one correct way of doing this; it is an issue of judgement. Having taken a decision to conduct a semi-structured interview, you will plan an overall structure for it. Almost certainly you will either have a list of topics that you want to cover or a list of questions that are important. The more experienced you become at interviewing, the more you will tend to work to a list of topics; but when you first conduct an interview, it might be wisest to work out the best way of asking specific questions.

Where a semi-structured interview differs from a more structured conversation is in the way you give space to your respondent to expand on a particular topic. To do this you will tend to ask open rather than closed questions. If all your questions are purely about facts and details, you won't get much further than a list of those details. If, on the other hand, you ask questions that offer your respondent more scope to discuss something that interests them, you are likely to get richer data.

Activity 3 Learning about people

15 minutes(s)

Write answers to the following two questions.

1. What subjects have you covered in your studies so far?
2. What are the most significant things that you've learned during your studies so far?

Which of these questions took longer to answer and which answer do you think would tell me more about you as a person, student and professional?

Comment

I have little doubt that your answer to the second question will have been much longer and that, whilst your answer to the first may have been quite a long list of topics from the different courses that you have studied, your answer to the second will almost certainly tell me which subjects have been more interesting to you, relevant to your professional work and influential in what you consider important.

On the other hand, your answers to the first question may be immensely helpful to me as I work out where to go in an interview. As has so often been the case in our discussion of inquiry, it isn't a case of what is right and what is wrong; more, it is a case of working out whether open or closed questions are useful at a particular moment in an inquiry.

Take another look at question 2 in Activity 3. What do you think was the most important word in that question? I think that there are two really important words that make all the difference to how you answered the second question. They are

- 'learned'
- 'significant'.

In shifting from 'subjects you have covered' to 'what you've learned', I have opened up a much wider space for you to explore as you reply to my question. For example, you might well have learned about business topics such as marketing or finance but you have also learned about how well you can study on your own. Perhaps, given that this course is unlikely to have been your first course, you've also learned that 'I can do it! I can study at university!' For many people starting off their learning, the fact that they can do it when they had always thought that learning was beyond them is the biggest thing they learn.

Researcher's experience: Mark Fenton-O'Creevy tells an interesting story.

'My first degree was in pure mathematics and I learned a great deal about linear analysis, topological spaces and other esoteric subjects. However, I also learned problems come well-defined and neatly packaged and that there are clear-cut, right or wrong answers. As I've done more work in the field of management, I've had to 'unlearn' much of my learning from my first degree! Often diagnosing the problem is the hard part and most answers are partial or at best "good enough".'

Not all learning is always helpful learning, as Mark points out. In changing my question from 'subjects you've covered' to 'learning', I've offered space for more personal, subjective details to inform an answer.

The second important word that I've used is 'significant'. First, this word asks the respondent to evaluate their learning. I'm not just asking for a list of topics now; I'm asking

for your judgement as to what is making a difference, what is becoming important to you. So perhaps you answered my second question by writing: 'The most significant thing I've learned about business is the importance of people.' I wouldn't be surprised if something like that has featured in many answers, but it begs a set of other questions, doesn't it? How have you learned that? Why is it important? What are the implications for you of the learning? Can you give any examples of 'the importance of people' in your own working life? These are called **supplementary questions** and they are crucial to building up a successful semi- or unstructured interview.

1. 2 . 3 How do you know which type of interview to use?

In Table 1 below, I have summarised the main benefits of and problems with the different types of interview. As I've mentioned before there isn't a right way of interviewing and you will find yourself choosing to question people in a more or less structured manner; it won't always be a case of one or the other style. Anyway, here are some brief outlines of why you might choose one of the three types.

Table 1 Benefits of and problems with different types of interview

Interview Type	Benefits	Problems
Structured	helps keep a consistency when you are interviewing several different people about the same issue	structure gets in the way of an organic interview; does not enable you to change your questions in tune with an emerging conversation, or follow up interesting themes, issues or inconsistencies
	can be used to contrast responses from people in different groups	structures the interview from your perspective rather than the respondent's
	questions can be designed before an interview, so that your wording can be made clear	
	you can pilot your questions beforehand, so that you can see if they work	
	whilst more care, and time, is needed in setting these interviews up, making sense of what's been said is easier	
Unstructured	gives more scope for the respondent to 'structure' the interview	interviews can go off the topic you want to discuss
	gives more opportunity for issues that are new to you to be discussed	interpreting the interview can often be time consuming
	allows you to get a feel for how your respondent might work with your proposed changes	perhaps easier for experienced interviewers
	gives more opportunity to explore apparent inconsistencies, either within the interview itself or with information you have gathered from other sources	
Semi-structured	can give some of the benefits of both structured and unstructured	semi-structured interviews won't save you either from being too restrictive in your questions or from respondents

who ignore your concerns and talk
about their own issues!

possibly a good compromise for those
new to conducting interviews

Reasons that you might choose to conduct a more structured interview

If you've never conducted an interview before, you might well want to have your questions set out in front of you so that you don't forget an important question. In addition to settling your nerves it might also help you plan the questions and word them in a way that doesn't confuse people. Asking questions is a skilled job and it does take time to build your confidence; experience will help you feel at ease in reading interview situations and asking good questions with less preparation. So be prepared to learn on the job, so to speak. It might well be worth practising with friends, especially if you're about to interview your boss. And that point makes me think that maybe you should be careful about who to interview first!

There are other important reasons for asking your questions in a more structured way. For example, if you want to compare perceptions across different groups of people then you need to make sure that you ask them exactly the same questions. This will ensure that any differences are due to differences in the people you asked, not variation in your questions. In the same way, the more important it is that you build up a 'true' picture of a situation, the more important it is that you ask all your respondents the same questions. Consequently the quality of the questions becomes more important which, in turn, will mean that you need to prepare those questions more carefully.

Structured interviews are not without their problems. For example, they restrict your potential for following up an interesting point made by your respondent. Additionally, they can restrict your flexibility to change direction in an interview should that become necessary. Following a fixed set of questions can also make it very difficult to create a sense of conversation that may help to open up interesting themes of inquiry.

Reasons you might choose to conduct a less structured interview

There are three major reasons behind the choice of unstructured interview methods. First, an unstructured interview gives you far greater flexibility to follow themes that emerge during the interview. There are occasions when your respondent says something that is really interesting which you want to follow up with supplementary questions. A second reason for conducting unstructured interviews is that they give greater scope for the respondents to set the agenda for what is discussed. Obviously, the interviewer will have an overview of the general topic to be discussed, but there are always several perspectives from which a topic can be viewed. On occasions it can be important to let the respondent, rather than the interviewer, set that perspective for the discussion. This is because you may very well want to see how different people approach the same general topic; those differences are part of your inquiry.

A final reason for using a more unstructured approach is particular to a practice-centred inquiry. Often in conducting an interview you will not only be seeking out information but will also want to get a feel for how your respondent will co-ordinate with your intended new way of working. In such circumstances, giving space for your respondent to set an agenda will enable you to hear more of what is important to them and so attune your future actions to their values and opinions. Additionally, unstructured interviews give you, as the interviewer, greater scope to change your questions and inputs in tune with an emerging conversation. So you can test your new ideas or respond to a challenge or encouragement.

The problems with unstructured interviews include the danger of your respondents heading off into irrelevant topics. There is also a problem that as an unstructured interview goes on, it can be very difficult to fit in a particular question that you want to ask. Indeed, on occasions, I have got so interested in what my respondent was telling me that I forgot to bring up some of the issues on my list! A third problem with unstructured interviews is that it is very difficult to compare one person's answer with another's, for it might be that the reason that they didn't talk about a topic is not to do with them considering it unimportant, but because the interview didn't go that way.

So which ...?

Well, as I've said more than once, there is no right way of interviewing and neither are the different types of interview necessarily exclusive. I suspect that many reading this book will tend to go for a semistructured interview where you have a schedule of topics to discuss but where you can allow different interviews to develop in different ways.

Certainly, if you are new to interviewing, then that would seem a wise way forward. As you build experience, so you may become more relaxed about how detailed to make your schedule of questions. Having said that, there are times when a structured approach to interviewing is more appropriate and when the benefits of that approach outweigh the benefits of flexibility in an unstructured interview. As you decide, keep in mind the objective that you've set for the interview: the purpose for which you want the information.

1.3 Conversations

I wonder if you have a mental image of an interview. Perhaps, the word conjures up a picture of an intense, confrontational television interview between a TV interviewer and a politician, or maybe you think of a chat-show host, or a short snippet of film such as a vox pop, as a TV reporter gets a comment from the 'ordinary people in the street'.



Figure 4 Jeremy Paxman

What these interviews all have in common is that they are formally organised; but a moment's thought will remind us of many informal conversations where we have learned something or heard new information. So in addition to formally organised interviews you will also find that informal conversations give you the scope for asking important questions.



Figure 5 An informal conversation taking place by a watercooler

For ease of discussion, I'll deal with these informal conversations under two headings, planned conversations and unplanned; but, to be honest, there isn't a hard dividing line between the two types.

1.3.1 Planned conversations

There are many reasons why you might choose not to conduct an interview with people, especially if you work with them. First, unless they're aware of your undertaking an educational project, the request for an 'interview' will seem just plain strange! And if it feels strange to them that may well affect what they say to you. Second, especially when you are undertaking a practice-centred inquiry, the people you might need to talk with may not believe they have the time for a formal interview, whereas they'll be relaxed 'chatting' with you for ten minutes. Thirdly, there may well be times when you don't want your informant to be aware that your questions to them are part of a coherent project. Now, this

point raises some important issues about the ethics of an inquiry process and we'll have to return to that topic later in the book, but for now the point I want to make is that how open you are about your intentions in asking questions will affect the answers you are given, and this all has to go into the mix as you make sense of the information you gather through interviews.

So what are the important points to consider as you plan an informal conversation as a method for gathering information?

What's the best place and time?

I once had a manager who would always argue with me and try to show that any new idea of mine wasn't any good. He seemed determined to win arguments. So whenever I wanted to suggest a new idea to him, I'd find out when he would be on his way to a meeting and I'd 'chance' to bump into him in the corridor. 'Oh George,' I'd say, 'I know you haven't the time to talk now but I'm thinking of doing xyz;' (I'd mention some sort of new plan;) 'could we talk about it later?' He'd say yes and hurry off to his meeting. Later he'd come to my office and always be in a different kind of mood. Somehow he'd want to encourage me or, maybe, the idea had become his own.

Whatever the reason, he would be far more open to the new idea and usually really helpful and wise. In the same way, if you are looking to ask a colleague, client or boss a question, you have to think what time and place would be the best to get a thoughtful and helpful answer. Maybe the canteen at lunchtime or just as work is slowing down at the end of a shift ... you will have some ideas about the best time and place to ask your question.



Figure 6 Two people having a discussion

How many questions can you ask?

This, again, is a question of judgement and you might have to change your mind at the very moment of a conversation! By and large you won't be able to ask too many questions without your respondent feeling 'got at', so think that through and be ready to read the signs if you're pressing your luck during the conversation. It might be worth trying to ask different questions on different occasions rather than trying to get every question asked at one time.

Declaring your intentions

This can be a tricky question and it leads back to the issue of our ethical responsibility, which I've discussed elsewhere. How much should you tell a colleague about your project before asking him or her your questions? There are several points to consider:

- Is it fair to use someone's thoughts in a project when they weren't aware of what you were doing?
- If they had known you were trying to do something they disagreed with, might they have given a different answer?
- Might you lose the sense of open and informal conversation if you indicate that there is a project lurking behind your 'innocent' question?

These are important questions of ethics and practicality. Seeking to balance the relative importance of each issue is not easy and will require some careful thinking.

Are you just a questioner or are you giving of yourself?

Just asking questions can create a very one-sided conversation. Sometimes, if you want someone to talk freely, then you will need to be open yourself. If you want someone to 'think out loud' then you may need to do the same or they will feel that you are taking advantage of them. This, however, causes a real quandary to an inquirer, for disclosing your own point of view on a matter might influence the answer you're given. There is no straightforward solution to this. If you were an external researcher coming into an organisation, it would be much easier to be detached and dispassionate, but practice-centred inquiries are generally done within your own organisation where the apparent objectivity that some researchers desire is just not possible. David Coghlan, in the reading 'Insider action research projects' at the end of this book, discusses this problem.

1. 3 .2 Unplanned conversations

Sometimes, almost out of the blue, a colleague or friend will say something that is really helpful to your inquiry and you will find yourself in a conversation that almost becomes an interview. On other occasions an opportunity will arise, perhaps because of a car journey together or over a cup of coffee, and you will be able to shape a conversation to help answer questions that are relevant to your inquiry. Now, you will need to be careful, of course, for if you get a reputation for steering every chance conversation towards your 'pet project', very soon *nobody* will be willing to chat with you! However, do be attentive to opportunities that present themselves. One thing that I've found helpful is to carry a small notebook around with me where I can jot down interesting comments that I'd like to recall. We'll see that that notebook is also helpful if we're doing observational research.

1. 4 Interviewing skills

Interviewing, whether in formal settings or within informal conversations, is a skilled activity. It's something that we get better at with practice. So don't worry if you don't feel very skilled at asking questions to begin with; you **will** get better, but getting better requires you to do two things: first, get started even if you don't do it perfectly; and second, once you've begun, notice and attend to the areas where you need to improve. Here are some common areas where you will need to think and work carefully to become a skilled interviewer.



Asking clear questions

I've mentioned this a couple of times already but it bears repeating; you do have to work at making sure that your questions are clear to your respondent. Sometimes what is obvious to you is less clear to others. So try out your questions on friends first; do they see what you're getting at? Also, be careful about asking questions that are too simple; sometimes your respondent might think that you are trying to 'get at something' hidden. But remember that short questions are nearly always better than long, rambling questions that you need to explain.

Listening

This may seem obvious but it is so easy to hear what you *want* to hear rather than what is actually being said. Additionally, in less structured interviews, you need to listen carefully for signs that your respondent might want to say more or that they might want to shift the question a little. Is this a diversion or a valid shift in perspective? There are other times when your respondent will need some encouragement to tell their story – they might not be sure if you want to hear it! Listening inevitably involves us in making judgements about what we want or need to hear. As with asking clear questions, this is a skilled practice and one that you can only really learn as you get going and practise.

Judging when to push on with a line of questioning and when to stop

This is difficult: as an interviewer, you obviously have your agenda and there are times when you will want to stop your respondents heading off down a 'blind alleyway' or chasing a 'red herring'; but there are other times when allowing your respondent to choose what they say will be helpful. Similarly, there are times when a respondent doesn't seem to answer your question. How do you decide whether to push him to answer or leave him? Being too pushy can spoil the interview. As before, this skill needs practice; it's almost as if you need to build up a 'sixth sense'.

Have you noticed how I've kept returning to the point that you need to get underway with interviewing and asking questions before you become competent? This can be very difficult, even intimidating, to do. So often, we avoid doing things until we feel competent, but as with so many of life's skills, we have to get started and improve as we go along.

Keeping notes during an interview

So how are you going to remember what people say to you? You won't always be able to take notes, and listening carefully may often preclude taking them. I would strongly urge the use of digital recorders. They're very small, pretty inexpensive and do the job of recording conversations. Of course, in an unplanned conversation it might be impossible to record, so I suggest that you either keep a small notebook in your pocket or handbag or use a digital recorder to record your memories of the conversation as soon as possible after you finish. There isn't a perfect answer here, I'm afraid, but noting down what was said as soon as possible is very important.

1.5 What's different about a practice-centred interview?

Finally in this chapter, I want to consider a few points that arise from the fact that as you undertake a practice-centred inquiry, you will not only be needing to gather information; you will also be attempting to make things happen – to change the way work is done, to move to new priorities and to improve working performance. This unavoidably has an impact on how you gather information through interviews and conversations. There are three issues that you will need to be aware of as you ask questions and these issues will require you to develop strategies for dealing with them.

You will be asking questions of people with whom you have ongoing relationships

That person you're 'interviewing' today could be your boss or your customer tomorrow. You can't walk away from interviews treating them as discreet events with no relevance to what you can do tomorrow. Now, this can affect:

- **The questions you ask.** Can you ask colleagues personal questions? Is it fair or possible to ask questions of a manager that require her to pass judgement on a colleague? Unfortunately, there will be some questions that you can't ask or that your respondent might choose not to answer.
- **How your respondent will react to you in the future.** It may be that asking a particular question of a colleague will alert them to your interest in a particular issue. Now, that may be no bad thing! Indeed, it may be that, knowing your interest in some matter, your respondent digs out further information that might be helpful to you. The point here, however, is that asking people questions may affect, or be affected by, your on-going relations with your respondent.

Your conversations with colleagues may not only be opportunities for asking questions but also for influencing them

How do you decide whether to ask a question or push a particular agenda of your own? What if asking a question in a particular manner might help a colleague 'get it'? You may remember that earlier I mentioned problems about asking 'leading questions' – but you are engaged in a productive inquiry, where information gathering is a part of your attempt to make things happen! As is so often the case in this field, there are trade-offs between getting the very best information possible and achieving your work goals.

Another aspect of your on-going relationships is that **you will need to be sensitive to your colleagues**: without care, you can make interviews feel very demanding and even unpleasant for them. The person you are asking questions of is also a friend, a colleague, a drinking companion, a confidant, a competitor. There is no way round this: you will always have to consider the implications of asking questions for your on-going relations.

The opportunity to ask questions will often pop up most unexpectedly

Of course, often you will plan a more formal conversation, but as I mentioned in the section 'Unplanned conversations', sometimes you will just find yourself with the chance to gather some really helpful information. There's no way of planning such occasions, and you will have to develop 'antennae' to spot them. This skill, as with so much of interviewing, comes with practice, but do help yourself by looking for opportunities.

So how can you manage these issues?

I'm afraid that there is little advice that I can give on this question, for the answer will depend very much on your particular work context and the nature of your on-going relations with colleagues, friends and social contacts. In the end, your management of a work-based, productive inquiry will be down to your own judgement of what to do. Perhaps the following questions will help you make those judgements:

- Is getting a partial answer better than taking risks in order to get a 'perfect' answer?

- Would you like another person to treat you as you propose to treat a colleague when asking them questions?
- How do you balance a need to make progress with your project with a desire for better information?

Conclusion

In this course we have explored the various ways of gathering information by asking people questions. I have categorised this in different ways: formal interviews and informal conversations; structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews and, finally, planned and unplanned conversations. In each case we've thought about the benefits and problems of using each of these methods and I've sought to give clues for how to decide between the different types of interview and the skills needed to do each of them successfully.

... and finally

I am conscious that this has been a long and detailed course with many issues to be balanced and considered. I wonder if the whole process seems intimidating. There are two points to make here, which I hope will encourage you. First, even if you make a mistake, the nature of a productive inquiry will generally give you an opportunity to recover. The repeated cycles of inquiry will always give you an opportunity for testing and improving the information you have gathered and your understanding of that material. Second, I have stressed that productive inquiry is a gradual process and there are techniques that will help you constantly improve the quality of your understanding and information gathering. A crucial point about asking questions is that it's a skilled process, like playing the piano, playing tennis or working with computers. You get better at it! But only if you get started and learn from experience!

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