Learning the Craft of Interviewing

Steinar Kvale, University of Aarhus, Denmark

The following passage is taken from a book in press – “Doing Interviews”. (It will appear in the Qualitative Research Kit, edited by Uwe Flick, at Sage Publications, London, approximately summer 2007). The book is an updated and shortened edition of “InterViews” from 1996. After I had finished this book I joined a research project with Klaus Nielsen on apprenticeship learning in the crafts (Nielsen & Kvale, 1999, 2003, 2006), and also in research (Kvale, 1997). When reworking my book on interviews it struck me how research interviewing is less a method than a craft, and in the passage below some consequences for learning the craft of interviewing are depicted.

* 

Writing a book on the craft of interviewing involves a paradox of presenting explicit and general guidelines for a craft, which consists of practical skills and personal know-how that often remains tacit and depends on a given situation. While one does not become a good interviewer through reading a book about interview, a book can nevertheless provide some information about the terrain, through which an interview journey goes, and about available equipment for the journey, and thereby facilitate the journey and enhance the quality of the knowledge, which the interview traveller brings home. The preceding chapters have sought to present some of the multitude of courses, which may be followed in an interview inquiry, outlining choices available and their consequences for the knowledge produced.

Box 12.1 Learning Interviewing by Transcribing Interviews

Obtain about three tape-recorded research interview, use a week transcribing them, and reflecting on the processes and problems of transcribing and interviewing

Learning lessons:
- To secure a good quality of the sound recording
- To clarify inaudible answers during the interview
- To pose clear questions the interview subjects understand
- To listen carefully to what is said and how it is said
- To pay attention to the voice, the pauses, the sighs and the like, as indications that a topic may be important, and possibly also too sensitive to pursue
- To follow up an interview statement by second questions
- To avoid the interview becoming filled with small talk
- To notice the interviewer variations of questioning styles, their advantages and their drawbacks
To become aware of the differences between oral and written language, and the need of guidelines for translation from oral to written language
- To notice how new interpretations of the meanings may spontaneously arise when working closely with the oral recording
- To become sensitive to the possible ethical transgressions by questioning too privately or critically

At the start of this book I suggested that readers who wanted to learn interviewing in ways approximating the learning of a craft, should stop reading the book and perform the task described at the top of Box 12.1 before continuing to read the book. During a week of transcribing, newcomers to research interviewing will have discovered by themselves much of what has been said in the previous chapters about interviewing and transcribing, some of which is spelled out as learning lessons in the box. The transcription task is inspired by Tilley’s (2003) article “Transcription at work: learning through co-participation in research practices”.

Starting to learn interviewing by listening to tapes will sensitise novice interviewers to the oral medium of the interview craft. Learning interviewing by transcribing interviews promotes a discovery learning, where, through their own practice, newcomers to the trade discover techniques and dilemmas of transferring live conversations to written texts. In a safe transcribing situation, the novice may become aware of the subtleties of interviewing, where he or she will not ruin the knowledge production of an important interview, or ethically transgress the interviewees’ borders in a live interview situation.

Learning the craft of interviewing is ideally done through apprenticeships within a research community. Not every novice interviewer will have access to a research group where interviewing is part of the daily practice. Or the researchers may not have time available for instructing novices. One option in the latter case could be, as with apprenticeship learning of the crafts, that the novice “pays for the tuition” by performing the simple tasks necessary for the ongoing research projects, such as transcribing and learning on the way. In the analysis stage there may also be a need for several coders of the transcripts, allowing the learner to work his way into the trade by performing the tasks of the trade. In lieu of such an active qualitative interview research community, there are possibilities of self-study; inspired by Schön’s (1987) practicum for educating the reflecting practitioner, I shall outline an interview practicum for learners at different stages of mastering the craft of interviewing.
Box 12.2 An Interview Practicum

- **I. Learn interviewing by witnessing others interviewing**
  Sit in with a more experienced researcher who is interviewing, listen and observe, and gradually become active, take care of the recording and participate as a co-interviewer. Learning lessons:
  - Differences between the live interview situation and the tape-recorded speech
  - Significance of the social relationship of interviewer and interviewee
  - Importance of interviewers being knowledgeable of the topics they are asking about
  - Value of staging and scripting an interview in advance

- **II. Learn interviewing by practising interviewing**
  Learning lessons:
  - Acquiring self-confidence through gradual mastery of the practical, technical, social and conceptual issues of interviewing, and thereby becoming able to create a safe and stimulating interview situation
  - Options for improving the content, formulation and sequence of the questions
  - Become aware of the importance of mastering the art of second questions
  - Videotaping some pilot interviews will heighten sensitivity to the body language of interviewer and interviewee

- **III. Learn interviewing in a community of interview researchers**
  Learning occasions:
  - With several interviewers working at different stages of their projects an impression is obtained of the overall designing of an interview inquiry
  - Listening to interviews and interviewer stories about interviews
  - Receiving feedback on own pilot interviews from more experienced interviewers
  - Have another researcher interview you about your research theme, and uncover unreflected assumptions and personal biases to your interview theme

Some of the learning occasions in an interview practicum with other newcomers and in a regular research group are listed in Box 12.2, with some of the lessons to be learned, summed up from the preceding chapters of this book. The transcription task and the interview practicum have focused on two of the seven stages of an interview inquiry – transcribing and interviewing. In corresponding ways the other stages of an interview inquiry, such as analysis, may be learned in an interview practicum or in a research community, which provides a possibility to observe and, to some extent also assist, more experienced performers of the trade. Also an extensive study of interviews made by masters of the trade can support acquiring the skills of the trade, such as by reading the clinical interviews in Rogers’ “Client-Centered Therapy” (1956) and the research interviews in Bourdieu et al.’s “The Weight of the World – Social Suffering in Contemporary Society” (1999).

The road to mastery of interviewing through a transcribing task, an interview practicum, or ideally a research apprenticeship, may appear as too cumbersome and time consuming to some students. Rather than such a slow learning process they may prefer fast learning in a crash...
course in interview techniques and then go straight on with their own interview project. In this respect we should keep in mind that therapeutic interviewers, as well as commercial interviewers, who live by the value of their interview findings to their employers, may require several years of training to master the craft of interviewing (chapter 4). While this may not be realistic in a crammed university program, the time needed for developing professional interviewing skills should not be overlooked in academic interview research.

References


