

# Research Interviews for Library and Information Professionals

by Andrew P. Carlin

The open-ended interview, as a research method, is a highly productive tool for eliciting information. Unfortunately, there is very little guidance for information professionals on its actual use. This article looks at some decisions that will affect the progress and outcome of interviews. As you'll never be able to recreate a particular conversation again, the objective of this article is to anticipate problems so that your interviewing experiences go more smoothly. While these notes are tailored toward research interviews, some are transferable to product design and user evaluation sessions also.

## Librarians as Researchers

Increasingly, librarians are being encouraged to engage in research [1]. The issue of whether librarians should engage in research isn't new [2]; nor is it a straightforward development of the librarian's status [3, 4].

There are important reasons why librarians should be competent in doing research: to conduct research for themselves for their own professional development; to conduct research on behalf of their employers or parent organizations; to justify their roles and demonstrate the value of information specialists to the organization; and to be able to appraise research in order to apply evidence-based library research to their own practice.

Before embarking upon a research project, you need to consider carefully the research question: What is the problem to which you need answers? Then consider what the most appropriate method would be in order to find these answers. Such methods may include using direct observations, questionnaires,

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focus groups and structured or unstructured interviews. Using unstructured or open-ended interviews as a research method does not mean performing "soft" research since there is now recognition that the aims of evidence-based practice do not disqualify insights from "qualitative" research [5].

While librarians can build upon their expertise in teasing out information from users in reference interviews – where librarians often has to present users with alternatives to discover what they are looking for – the research interview requires the librarian to resist putting words into the user's mouth. Instead, the librarian is seeking the user's understanding of a topic, rather than providing candidate lines of inquiry for the user to choose among topics.

There are lots of resources that discuss interviewing and developing rapport with your interviewee and that help with the analysis of "qualitative data" [6, 7, 8], but not so much on how to get started. A research primer for librarians [9] gives little practical detail on how to do interviews. For the moment, I shall assume that you know the research question; you know what you are going to ask (an interview schedule); and you have identified, approached and made appointments with people to interview. Beyond these steps, I'll give some practical tips on doing interviews.

## Recording

Before embarking on your interviews, remember that the decisions you make at the outset will influence, to a great extent, what sort of data you can collect and what you are able to do with the data [10]. With this in mind, you are in a stronger position to select different options for data analysis. For example, "Do I record the interview or take notes?" "What do I do with the recording?"

I recommend that you record your interviews. A recording is much more reliable than your memory of what an interviewee said, is more accurate than notes taken during the interview and may contain details that you will regard as important later (indeed, you may not even have noticed at the time). There are ethical implications of recording interviews, however. Ask permission before switching the recorder on. Tell interviewees the purpose of the interviews and the use envisaged for your project. Ensure that you give a thorough commitment to confidentiality – that everything they say is confidential, that you are the only person who will have access to the tape, that they will not be identifiable from any information they provide. If permission to record is granted, record your opening statement and promise of confidentiality as part of the interview. If you don't have permission to record the interview, don't record it. If you do have permission, remind the interviewee that it will be recorded before commencing the interview.

Once you have finished recording, you will find yourself asking, "What do I need to transcribe?" Do you transcribe only the interviewee's talk, only the talk that pertains to your project or a few sound bites? Transcribe everything, including your questions and prompts. How – and how much – you transcribe will affect how you analyze the interview and therefore affect the final analysis. If you only transcribe selectively, this will prevent you from considering the interviewee's understandings in entirety. A full transcription also allows you to judge how much you have influenced an interviewee's responses.

Obviously, you don't want to listen back to the recording and realize you've done most of the talking. Try to minimize the amount you talk. Knowing that you will be transcribing all of the talk will help you limit the amount of interruptions you make; use head nods rather than continually saying "Mm" or "Uh-huh" during answers.

### Test Your Equipment

Before you set off for the interview, make sure your recording machine is working properly, that its batteries won't go dead. Carry spare batteries with you just in case. Also, make sure you have spare tapes or memory cards. Take the plastic wrapper off any spare media you have; you don't want to have to fiddle with packaging during an interview, nor (worse) have to

pause before continuing the interview, nor (worse still) miss anything your interviewee says. What they have to say, in their own words, is paramount.

Position the microphone carefully so that it picks up both your interviewee's and your own voice. This skill requires practicing with your recording equipment, to establish the optimum distance according to background noise. Be prepared to move the microphone during the interview: you can't assume that because you have arranged interviews by appointment that they will be conducted in a quiet room away from all the noise. If your interest is software or system development, consider using a video camera also, positioned to capture user-routines and screen work [11], which can be matched with the audio files.

Be prepared to go on walkabout. Some of my most arresting interview experiences have been peripatetic. The shame about these impromptu walking tours was not having a video camera to record them; I only had an audio device. So you can only listen to someone saying "Look at that," etc. Note-taking is problematic when on the move, too! Just make sure you keep the microphone near the interviewee (it doesn't have to be too close – testing your equipment beforehand is vital) and keep a commentary of what's going on. This commentary is part of the interview: "Where are we now?" "What's going on here?" "Tell me what I'm looking at."

Treat the interview as a conversation rather than forcing a question-answer format throughout. Indeed, not everything you say has to be a question ("Tell me about that"); nor do all your questions have to be too specific. This restraint helps avoid introducing bias into questions or asking leading questions [12]. Try asking something like "So what's going on here?" Your interviewees are then in a position to interpret what you were asking about, rather than you determining what sort of answer they provide. You don't have to ask too many questions anyway since people are only too glad to have the opportunity to talk and be listened to.

While a certain level of competence is required to talk with software designers and systems engineers, don't be afraid to ask what you might perceive as stupid questions. Stupid questions make sure you get details that are taken for granted and sometimes elicit valuable information that might have been missed otherwise. Saying "You'll have to explain that for me" is

not playing dumb; it's getting the interviewee to tell you what's going on. At any rate, your interviewees are your local experts on the matter you are researching, and you want to hear their stories.

### During the Interview – Listening and Note-Taking

Listen carefully to what your interviewees say, and show them that you're listening attentively. Even when you are recording the interviews, make sure you take notes. When talking with your interviewees for 30 minutes (then turning the tape over hurriedly) you can get lulled into a false sense of security by the recording machine. However, the machine might not record everything, or it might have stopped working. So you must take notes during the interviews, but not so that note-taking interferes with listening or with the interview itself.

Make a note of anything you want to return to at the end of the interview: rather than interrupting the flow you can ask for clarification later. If you have a loose-leaf notebook, select one sheet (the top one is most useful) and write "notes-to-self" on it. This avoids you having lots of points needing clarification that you can't find, as they're all collected together on one page.

Whatever your interviewee has to say is relevant and is of interest. Frequently, you will hear interviewees say phrases such as "I don't know if this is relevant, but..." or "You're probably not interested in how [...] works." Reassure them that everything they say is important to you. It is.

### At the End of the Interview

After you've clarified any loose ends, ask the interviewees if they have any questions about your project. Answer these queries as best you can. Thank interviewees for their time. Be fulsome in acknowledging how helpful their insights will be to your research. Offer to send a copy of the recording you've made. If this offer is taken up, do send one.

### After the Interview

As soon as you get back to your workstation, you must make a backup of the recording – do so before listening to the recording, before transcribing or before any analysis. Work from the copy, not the original [10].

Write an appraisal of the interview while it is still fresh. What were the most surprising points to come out of the interview? Did anything go particularly well or particularly badly? Was there anything you would do differently or wouldn't do again? Did the interviewee draw your attention to anything you hadn't considered before and that you could introduce as a topic in future interviews? Detailing your own post-interview impressions will benefit the corpus of interviews for your current project and assist you in developing your interview skills for future projects.

Always remember that regardless of how careful you are with your interview schedule, every interview is different. In light of your interviews, you may find that you need to revise your research question, or you may discover that there is a more important topic for research than the one you set out to investigate. ■

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