

Face-to-face versus online interviews when choice is returned - the virtual mobility of qualitative researchers in changing HE spaces

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Narratives relaying the challenges and triumphs of teaching throughout the COVID-19 pandemic regularly emerge in research articles (Carillo et al., 2020; Godber and Atkins, 2021; Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021), but it was not just teaching that was thrown into virtual environments. This paper explores the impact of the unanticipated move towards online interviewing for two sets of interviews, as part of ongoing Professional Doctorate in Education studies. A narrative inquiry research method was combined with use of participant-selected artefacts, seeking to creatively enhance the research process (Kara, 2015) and trigger memories (Clandinin and Connelly, 2006). Participants brought artefacts representing their academic identity to the first interview and their relationship with students to a second. Consideration of whether an online environment may have inhibited the impact of artefacts used within the interview is explored in this paper.

Full paper

Conducting qualitative interviews

For many years the face-to-face interview has been held in high esteem, perceived as the “gold standard” of qualitative research (Novick, 2008, p. 397). This despite technology advancements

offering a growing range of alternative interview spaces, such as telephone and online. Interviewing face-to-face is known to have advantages – it supports social interaction, can engender trust, and enables body language to be read (Taylor et al., 2015), however the ability to easily cross geographical boundaries and cost-saving aspects of telephone and online interviews began to be recognised even pre-COVID-19. Oltman (2016) identifies several factors that have influenced decisions whether to interview online or face-to-face, quoting

- Time and financial costs
- Geographical distribution of respondents
- Sensitive or controversial topics
- Technology problems
- Interviewer safety
- Note taking
- Interaction effects
- Non-verbal language and cues

The drive to online

Two sets of interviews were planned in 2019, as part of an ongoing Professional Doctorate in Education. The option to interview online was not considered, with assumptions being made that interviews would be best conducted face-to-face. The intention was to interview participants in booked rooms on campus – a neutral environment, enabling full focus on the discussion topic without any distractions or interruptions (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Views differ on whether interviews should be conducted within a familiar or neutral environment, but researchers agree that the environment should be comfortable and free from disruption and noise (McGrath et al., 2019).

Eight participants were recruited, each taking part in two narrative inquiry interviews several weeks apart – one with a focus on academic identity and one with a focus on student relationships. Participants were asked to bring an artefact of their choice to each interview, to represent their academic identity and their relationship with students. Kara (2015) advocates the use of artefacts to creatively enhance the research process and Clandinin and Connelly (2006) note that artefacts are useful to trigger memories. It was felt

that conducting interviews in neutral environments would enable participants to focus on the artefact and for it to prompt their thoughts throughout the interview.

Conducting the interviews

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, all interviews had to be conducted online during Summer 2020, using Microsoft Teams. Participants were at home or in their office, not the neutral environment planned for the research. It often appeared that the artefact was lost amongst other items around them – one participant could not find the artefact they intended to share due to the clutter on their table. Invariably participants began each interview by explaining what they had brought and why, before then putting the artefact down amongst other items around them. The artefact was habitually never referred to again within the interview.

There is no evidence to suggest that the use of artefacts was any less impactful within the online interview, as the narratives around the artefacts presented were hugely revealing, despite them only being referred to at the beginning of interviews. It is believed that the use of artefacts did creatively enhance the research process and contributed to the research findings – analysis is still ongoing and further papers will reveal the full extent of the contributions of the artefacts to the research findings. However, the extent to which artefacts played their part within an online interview compared to a face-to-face interview in a neutral environment is of interest. Reflecting on the interviews, consideration has been given to whether in a neutral environment, with nothing else to distract them, participants may have engaged with the artefacts multiple times throughout the interview – whether the artefact could have (as anticipated) prompted their thoughts throughout the interview and whether potentially more insights could have been revealed.

Discussion

Society came out of lockdown seeking face-to-face interaction, having missed and realised its benefits (Long et al., 2022). The question arises over whether researchers similarly seek to resume face-to-face qualitative research. Sustainability issues continue to be powerful drivers to continue operating online however, researchers

should consider the impact of different interview settings on the research method adopted.

An interesting future project would be to use artefacts as part of interviews within both face-to-face neutral environments and within online environments, to compare mentions of and engagement with the artefact throughout the interview process.

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