

Asking Questions: Interview Assignment

Summary of key issues raised in the interview:

The qualitative interview is “a directed conversation that elicits inner views of respondents’ lives as they portray their worlds, experiences, and observations.” (Van den Hoonaard 104) For this interview, I was interested in student experiences with curriculum and course availability. My semi-structured interview “included a series of predetermined but open-ended questions and used a variety of probes to elicit further information.” (Van den Hoonaard 103) The broad categories listed in my interview guide included participant experiences with curriculum, course availability, and course enrollment. During the interview, I asked the participant the following questions: what led the participant to choose Capilano University; the participant’s year and program; how many courses the participant is currently enrolled in; experience with curriculum; experience with course availability; experience with time tickets and wait-listing; courses the participant would like to see on the curriculum; and other recommendations (if any) for change. At the end of the interview, I asked “Is there anything that I haven’t asked you about that I should have?” (Van den Hoonaard 110)

The participant placed importance on distance from home and cost of tuition in their selection of Capilano University. The participant’s experience with their program curriculum was positive overall, however, they expressed that some of the required courses did not seem pertinent to

the overall program. Participant experiences with course availability was not positive – the participant expressed dissatisfaction with courses offered only once a year, explaining that their duration at Capilano has been extended because of this. As well, the participant expressed frustration with the amount of summer courses offered at the university, especially in the upper levels. In discussing time tickets and wait-listing, the participant was unaware of the university's model for assigning time-tickets and expressed confusion due to their perception that students with fewer credits have time-tickets before their own. The participant had a positive experience with wait-listing and noted that despite being put on wait-lists for some courses, this always resulted in gaining entry into the class. The participant expressed a desire to see more upper level Sociology courses. The participant recommended that the university provide more summer courses and upper level electives, and give time-ticket priority to students with more credits.

Reflection on what worked and did not work:

I approached two-student strangers before finding a participant who was willing and able to take part in my interview – the other students explained that they were limited on time due to midterm exams and therefore unable to participate. During the interview, the closed-ended questions regarding the participant's year and program and how many courses the participant is enrolled in did not elicit further conversation. However, these questions did provide context to the overall experience of the participant and led to further prompts at the end of the interview. The participant asked for clarification on the question about experiences with

curriculum. I paused to think about how to clarify this question and avoid coming up with a “rewording that is more complex and convoluted than [my] original question.” (Van den Hoonaard 115) I clarified by asking “What is your experience with the courses offered in your program?” In discussing experience and feelings regarding time-tickets, the participant asked me to share my own ideas about the university’s ticket-ticket designation system. I responded that I was also not certain of the protocol but am under the impression that it is a combination of both GPA and credit completion to date. In hind sight, I am unsure if I should have provided the participant with this potential misinformation but felt it necessary in order to maintain the “intrinsic sense of reciprocity between the interviewer and the participant in an in-depth interview.” (Van den Hoonaard 113) At the end of the interview, the participant did not provide further information upon my asking “Is there anything that I haven’t asked you about that I should have?”

The participant spoke to each of the other interview guide questions in detail and the interview progressed more naturally than I had imagined – this is especially true for the questions about course availability. At the 10-minute mark, I had referred to all interview guide questions and then moved onto probes, or “follow-up question[s] [to incite] the participant to elaborate, explain, or provide a story or example of what she or he has said,” that I had created while the participant was speaking. Using probes, I learned how the participant coordinates class scheduling with work; why and how the participant has looked outside of Capilano to complete courses required for program completion; and, how these experiences have led the participant to contemplate leaving Capilano University.

Strengths and weaknesses as an interviewer:

The first challenge I faced in the student-stranger interview process was deciding who to approach – I do not have an affinity for talking to people that I do not know. I was nervous about conducting my first interview but felt obligated to overcome this due to the required assignment. At the start of the interview, I provided the participant with the informed consent form and asked for a second verbal acknowledgment that I would be recording the interview on my iPhone and deleting the recording after completing my assignment. I initiated this second verbal consent to avoid any feelings of unease related to being recorded – recording did not prove to be an issue during the interview process. At one time during the interview I noticed myself sitting back and folding my arms – I quickly corrected this to “communicate [my] interest through [my] body language.” (Van den Hoonaard 114) During the interview, I made sure to avoid using questions that begin with the word *why*. For example, when asking the participant about their experience with course availability, I asked “Do you have any experience or feelings regarding course availability at Capilano?” The participant’s response to this question led to my asking “How has this effected your overall experience at Capilano?” I hesitated against filling pauses that occurred during the interview, but remembered that “silence can give your participant a chance to compose his or her thoughts.” (Van den Hoonaard 114) I struggled with taking notes and writing prompts while also listening intently to the participant – I was concerned that this multi-tasking might result in my missing something important that the participant mentioned. As a result, my notes during the interview were not very detailed, however, I was cognisant that I could refer back to the interview recording at a later time and placed importance on listening to the participant in the moment. I was able to make clear

connections to information that the participant provided during the interview when asking prompts towards the end of the interview. I did not make use of transitions well, however, I expressed vocal interest throughout the interview and my lack of transitions did not seem to effect the overall conversational tone. The interview progressed more fluidly than I had expected and I was surprised by my strengths as an interviewer. The interview guide was very helpful for the interview process, but I would have felt more comfortable had I approached the interview with more, properly formulated questions.

Works Cited

Van den Hoonaard, Deborah K. "In-Depth Interviewing." *Qualitative Research in Action: A Canadian Primer*, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 99-118.