
Interviewing Strategies

Purpose of the Tool

BUILDING
INQUIRY SKILLS

Interviewing can be done for a variety of purposes, but it is fundamentally about listening carefully and attentively to someone else. In inquiry-based practice, you can use interviews to:

- Find out factual information related to your interview theme (e.g. where students do their homework, how long students spend on technology devices each day, what types of professional development experiences colleagues have been involved in previously, etc.)
- Follow up on survey responses or other kinds of “artifacts” of teaching and learning (e.g. student work, a lesson plan) to gain a more nuanced understanding about someone’s thinking
- Listen to people explain their experiences, thinking, or hopes in their own words (e.g. what they think they learned in a subject area, how they think school connects to their life outside school)

You might also support your students to become effective interviewers and incorporate student-to-student interviews in your documentation process.

The following guidelines relate to semi-structured interviews. This approach involves developing a set of questions to use flexibly in an interview depending on how the conversation unfolds. This is different from open-ended interviews, which are informal, unstructured conversations with no set questions, and standardized interviews that involve asking everyone the same questions in the same order.

Suggested Time Commitment



This tool, or set of guidelines, is intended to be highly flexible. Some of the principles outlined below could be incorporated into a relatively short listening experience. However, preparing for, conducting, and then analyzing an interview or a series of interviews could take considerably longer.

When & How

Interviewing can be used in the initial stages of developing an innovation. Listening to people’s perspectives, ideas, and needs can be an excellent way to gather insights and find out where you would be starting from in terms of your innovation. Later on, interviewing can be an effective way to gather data on how your innovation is going.

Steps

1. Getting ready: What do you want to find out, and why?

Articulate what you are hoping to find out from your interviews. For example, do you want to find out more about what students find engaging and motivating as learners? Do you want to find out how teachers

experience professional development at your school and how they would like to grow personally and professionally? Do you want to hear about how a student approached a class assignment in a particular way? Make sure to consider whose perspectives you most want to hear as you think about who you will interview.

2. Framing questions: What questions are you going to ask?

You may find it helpful to draw up the following table to help you separate out what you want to find out and what you'll actually ask. It can sometimes be difficult for people to answer direct questions: try to find ways to ask questions that will allow your interview participant to speak naturally but at the same time give you the kinds of information or insights you need.

What I want to find out	Questions I will ask

As you develop your questions, these tips may be helpful.

- Avoid leading questions, or in other words, questions that steer your interview participant to give you the answers you are hoping to hear. Try to ask your questions as open-endedly as possible.
- Ask your interview participant to describe an experience (“Tell me about ...” or “What was it like for you to...?”). Try to avoid asking them directly to remember certain events because that can cause anxiety regarding the accuracy of their memories.
- Try asking interview participants to talk to you about a hypothetical situation or as if you or they were someone else – for example, “If I were a parent seeking advice about helping my child develop better reading habits, what would you say to me?” or “How would you explain the word “culture” to a child in 3rd grade?”
- Try to get your interview participant to tell a story about an experience.

If possible, try to record your interview so you can listen to it later on. You could use a recording device such as a voice memo function on a phone or computer, a mobile phone app (for example, RecUp), or a digital or tape recorder. Otherwise, take handwritten notes.

3. Conducting the interview

While conducting an interview, the key principle to focus on is “listen more, talk less.” You need to actively listen to what the person is saying, what they’re maybe not saying, and how the overall interview is going. There are a lot of similarities between good interviewing and good teaching.

Interviewing someone is a human-to-human interaction. You are an essential part of the conversation and how you do the interview will help shape what you find out. Your questions, tone, follow-up comments, and non-verbal cues will all potentially affect what the person you’re interviewing chooses to share with you.

Here are some tips:

- Ask clarifying questions if you’re not sure what the interview participant means. For example, “Tell me

again about...”; “What do you mean by...?”

- Follow up on what seem like interesting phrases or comments. However, try to avoid interrogating someone in ways that might make them feel defensive or judged.
- Try not to interrupt the flow of the conversation – you can jot down things you want to come back to.
- Gently try to keep your interview participant on topic.
- Try to avoid sharing your own experiences and opinions; try to avoid reinforcing particular kinds of responses by nodding or agreeing the whole time (at the same time indicate that you’re interested and listening).
- Tolerate silence and include wait time. The best answers often come after an interview participant has had time to think about what they want to say.
- Before you finish, ask the person you are interviewing if there is anything they would like to add.
- You likely want to write down key pieces of information as they come up; however, do any note-taking in a way that avoids disrupting the flow of the conversation.

4. Interpreting the interview

Immediately after the interview, jot down your impressions of the interview, including what the interview felt like (for example, was the conversation relaxed, did the interview participant seem passionate about what they were saying, did you find yourself agreeing or disagreeing with what you were hearing?). What were the key takeaways for you? Was there anything surprising or unexpected that came up for you?

Where possible, listen to an audio recording of the interview. Bear in mind what you originally wanted to find out. What did you learn? What else came up that seems important? What do you notice about yourself as an interviewer? Are there any questions you wish you had asked or which you would change?

Attributions and Additional Resources

Some of these tips come from Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. Third edition. New York: Teachers College Press.