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Name of Designated Person authorising scanning: Andrew Welshman

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Chapter 6

Technique Isn't Everything, But It Is a Lot

It is tempting to say that interviewing is an art, a reflection of the personality of the interviewer, and cannot be taught. This line of thinking implies that either you are good at it or you are not. But that is only half true. Researchers can learn techniques and skills of interviewing. What follows is a discussion of those skills as I have come to understand them from my own experience of interviewing and that of others.

LISTEN MORE, TALK LESS

Listening is the most important skill in interviewing. The hardest work for many interviewers is to keep quiet and to listen actively. Many books about interviewing concentrate on the types of questions that interviewers ask, but I want to start this chapter by talking about the type of listening the interviewer must do.

Interviewers must listen on at least three levels. First, they must listen to what the participant is saying. They must concentrate on the substance to make sure that they understand it and to assess whether what they are hearing is as detailed and complete as they would like it to be. They must concentrate so that they internalize what participants say. Later, interviewers' questions will often flow from this earlier listening.

On a second level, interviewers must listen for what George Steiner (1978) calls "inner voice," as opposed to an outer, more public voice. An outer, or public, voice always reflects an awareness of the audience. It is not untrue; it is guarded. It is a voice that participants would use if they were talking to an audience of 300 in an auditorium. (For a very thoughtful explication of listening for inner voice, see Devault, 1990, pp. 101–105.)

There is a language of the outer voice to which interviewers can become sensitive. For example, whenever I hear participants talk about the

problems they are facing as a "challenge" or their work as an "adventure," I sense that I am hearing a public voice, and I search for ways to get to the inner voice. *Challenge* and *adventure* convey the positive aspects of a participant's grappling with a difficult experience but not the struggle. Another word that attracts my attention is *fascinate.* I often hear that word on talk-show interviews; it usually works to communicate some sort of interest while covering up the exact nature of that interest. Whenever I hear a participant use *fascinate,* I ask for elucidation. By taking participants' language seriously without making them feel defensive about it, interviewers can encourage a level of thoughtfulness more characteristic of inner voice.

On a third level, interviewers–like good teachers in a classroom–must listen while remaining aware of the process as well as the substance. They must be conscious of time during the interview; they must be aware of how much has been covered and how much there is yet to go. They must be sensitive to the participant's energy level and any nonverbal cues he or she may be offering. Interviewers must listen hard to assess the progress of the interview and to stay alert for cues about how to move the interview forward as necessary.

This type of active listening requires concentration and focus beyond what we usually do in everyday life. It requires that, for a good part of the time, we quash our normal instinct to talk. At the same time, interviewers must be ready to say something when a navigational nudge is needed.

In order to facilitate active listening, in addition to tape-recording the interview, interviewers can take notes. These working notes help interviewers concentrate on what the participant is saying. They also help to keep interviewers from interrupting the participant by allowing them to keep track of things that the participant has mentioned in order to come back to these subjects when the timing is right.

A good way to gauge listening skills is to transcribe an interview tape. Separate the interviewer's questions from the participant's responses by new paragraphs. Compare the relative length of the participant's paragraphs with the interviewer's. If the interviewer is listening well, his or her paragraphs will be short and relatively infrequently interspersed among the longer paragraphs of the participant's responses.

Note the following one-page transcript, for example. It is taken from the beginning of interview number two on the experience of being an instructional designer.

INTERVIEWER: Could you tell me as much as possible about the details of your experience at work as an instructional

designer presently or as a grad student working in the area of instructional design?

PARTICIPANT: The details of instructional design . . . OK

INTERVIEWER: Your present experience . . .

PARTICIPANT: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: As an instructional designer.

PARTICIPANT: Umh . . . So something like . . . you mean something like perhaps the last several jobs I've done?

INTERVIEWER: No, what you're presently doing, like as a student maybe right now or you said you did have a job that you're working on.

PARTICIPANT: Yeah, well, I have one current, current job, umh, the thing is that when you said current I may or may in any given day, I may or may not happen to have a job; you know they just, they just fall out of the sky. You don't really–My experience in getting work has been that–no matter what I do to try to get work I don't see any direct results between those efforts and getting the jobs, right. On the other hand, I do get jobs. They just fall out of the sky [laugh]. All I can say about you know like meteorites. Unh, and they range over a wide, wide variety of–of contact. Umh [sniffle] it could be teaching office workers how to use software. I've done all of those, all of those kinds of things. Umh, and typically the things start through the proposal, umh less and less I've been doing the actual proposals, but usually I'm not ah–the actual getting the business is not my job and somewhere there is a line between; writing the proposal is part of getting the business and um so I usually have something to do with writing the proposal but I don't do a lot of getting the business. Umh [sniffle] somewhere after the proposal is written or during the proposal stage I'm brought in [sniffle]–and I get to do the work. (Reproduced from Tremblay, 1990)

This text is a good example of an interviewer's listening hard to a participant. At the beginning of the interview, the participant is not quite focused. The interviewer, concentrating on what he is saying, nudges him into the frame of reference of the second interview. Once she has the participant in the right channel, she listens and lets him talk. Even when the participant pauses for a few seconds, she does not interrupt.

Patai (1987) describes the process of listening to her Brazilian women participants as an intense form of concentration and openness to them that led her to become absorbed in them (p. 12). Although not every interview takes on the almost magical quality that Patai describes, interest in the participant's experience and a willingness to hold one's own ego in check are keys to the hard work of listening in an interview that leads to the type of absorption Patai describes.

FOLLOW UP ON WHAT THE PARTICIPANT SAYS

When interviewers do talk in an interview, they usually ask questions. The key to asking questions during in-depth interviewing is to let them follow, as much as possible, from what the participant is saying. Although the interviewer comes to each interview with a basic question that establishes the purpose and focus of the interview, it is in response to what the participant says that the interviewer follows up, asks for clarification, seeks concrete details, and requests stories. While interviewers may develop preset interviewing guides to which they will refer when the timing is right, interviewers' initial basic work in this approach to interviewing is to listen actively and to move the interview forward as much as possible by building on what the participant has begun to share.

Ask Questions When You Do Not Understand

It is hard work to understand everything people say. Sometimes the context is not clear. At other times we do not understand the specific referent of what someone is saying. In everyday conversation we often let such things slide by without understanding them. In interviewing such sliding undermines the process.

The interview structure is cumulative. One interview establishes the context for the next. Not having understood something in an early interview, an interviewer might miss the significance of something a participant says later. Passages in interviews become links to each other in ways that cannot be foretold. Also, the interviewer who lets a participant know when he or she does not understand something shows the person that the interviewer is listening.

Sometimes it is difficult to get the chronology of an experience straight. It is important for interviewers to understand experiences in the context of time. A question like, "Can you tell me again when that hap-

pened?" is a reasonable one. I use the word *again* so as not to imply to participants that they are not being clear, thereby making them defensive, but rather, as is often the case, to suggest that I was just not attentive enough the first time around.

Sometimes participants use vague words that seem to be communicating but are not explicit. For example, one community college faculty member whom I interviewed consistently described his students by saying, "They are very nice." I did not know what he meant by the term *nice.* In a way it seemed to trivialize the respect for his students that he had communicated throughout the interview. I asked him, "What is *nice*?" He said,

> The students at the private university [where he had previously taught] were rude, and they were frequently demanding. I don't mean intellectually demanding. They would say, "You didn't say that. You didn't say you were going to test us on that sort of thing." Our students at the community college are really nice. I realize this sounds silly; I apologize for it. It really sounds crazy to say for some reason we happen to have the nicest people around that happen to live in this neighborhood. Now that's not likely. But we have an attitude on this campus. There is a kind of mutual respect and I get a lot of this when our students come back after they have gone somewhere else. . . . There is a different feeling, even though it is a bigger school, and you really don't know everybody. Uh, nonetheless there is a kind of community feeling here and there is a lack of what I call a mean spirit where you are just touchy and aggressive and, uh, inquisitive. Maybe our students are not that motivated; maybe that's why they are not; but they are really nice to teach. You almost never have anything you could call a discipline problem. It just doesn't happen. . . . I don't know; I do like our students. I think it would be absolutely perfect if they were a little better prepared, but that's not as important as being nice people. . . . They are the kind of people that are pleasant to work with. (Interview in Seidman et al., 1983)

In responding to my request for clarification about his use of the word *nice*, the participant went more deeply into the nature of his teaching experience. By my taking his language seriously, he explored what he meant when he used the word *nice.* As the interviewer, I then understood better what, for him, were the complexities implied in his use of the apparently simple word *nice.*

Ask to Hear More About a Subject

When interviewers want to hear more about what a participant is saying, they should trust that instinct. Interviewers should ask questions

when they feel unsatisfied with what they have heard. Sometimes they do not think that they have heard the entire story; other times they may think that they are getting generalities and they want to hear the details; or they may just be interested in what the participant is saying and want to hear more. Sometimes when listening, interviewers begin to feel a vague question welling up inside them because they sense there is more to the story. In those instances it is important for them to ask to hear more.

For example, in a study of older women returning to community colleges (Schatzkamer, 1986), one student spoke about her experience in a math course. The last two thirds of the technical math course she was taking was devoted to calculus.

She said, "At that point, I capsized. That was beyond the capacities of my math . . . it was beyond me. So I was obedient. This is something I don't usually do in school, but I just memorized and did what I was told and followed out the formulas the way I was told I should and which I regret. I got an A, but I regret it."

The interviewer, hearing the phrase "I regret it," wanted to hear more. She asked, based on what the participant had said, "What do you regret?"

The participant responded, "I never really understood it, you know. I didn't really learn. I'm sure there is something lovely there under all that calculus to be learned and I didn't learn that. I theoretically learned how to use it as a tool. By being slavish you know: plugging numbers into formulas and finding the right formula and stuff; that's not the way math should be learned and it's not really understanding."

By following up on the participant's phrase of regret, the interviewer gave the participant a chance to go a step further in her story. In so doing she revealed a desire to learn and a potential appreciation for the beauty of math that increases the reader's understanding of her community college experience and our respect for her as an individual.

Explore, Don't Probe

In referring to the skill of following up on what participants say, the literature on interviewing often uses the word *probe.* (See, e.g., Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rubin & Rubin, 1995.) I have never been comfortable with that word. I always think of a sharp instrument pressing on soft flesh when I hear it. The word also conveys a sense of the powerful interviewer treating the participant as an object. I am more comfortable with the notion of exploring with the participant than with probing into what the participant says.

At the same time, too much and ill-timed exploration of the participant's words can make him or her defensive and shift the meaning making from the participant to the interviewer. The interview can become too easily a vehicle for the interviewer's agenda rather than an exploration of the participant's experience. Too little exploration, however, can leave an interviewer unsure of the participant's meaning in the material he or she has gathered. It can also leave the participant using abstractions and generalities that are not useful (Hyman et al., 1954).

LISTEN MORE, TALK LESS, AND ASK REAL QUESTIONS

Listen more, talk less. I repeat the first principle of interviewing here for emphasis and because it is so easy to forget. When you do ask questions, ask only real questions. By a real question I mean one to which the interviewer does not already know or anticipate the response. If interviewers want to ask a question to which they think they know the response, it would be better to say what they think, and then to ask the participant what he or she thinks of the assertion.

Avoid Leading Questions

A leading question is one that influences the direction the response will take. Sometimes the lead is in the intonation of the question: The tone implies an expectation. Sometimes it is in the wording, syntax, and intonation of the question, as when an interviewer asks, "Did you *really* mean to do that?" Sometimes the lead is in the conclusion implied by the question. One interviewer, listening to a participant's story about her family and her early schooling, asked: "Your parents pushed you to study, didn't they?" Or in another place, the interviewer asked, "How satisfied were you with your student teaching placement?" instead of, for example, "What was your student teaching placement like for you?" (For a more extensive discussion of leading questions, see Kvale, 1996; Patton, 1989; Richardson et al., 1965.)

Ask Open-ended Questions

An open-ended question, unlike a leading question, establishes the territory to be explored while allowing the participant to take any direction he or she wants. It does not presume an answer. There are at

least two types of open-ended questions especially relevant to in-depth interviewing. One is what Spradley (1979) calls the "grand tour" question (pp. 86–87), in which the interviewer asks the participant to reconstruct a significant segment of an experience. For example, in interviewing a counselor, an interviewer might say, "Take me through a day in your work life." Or in working with a student teacher, an interviewer might ask, "Reconstruct your day for me from the time you wake up to the time you go to bed."

There is also the mini-tour, in which the interviewer asks the participant to reconstruct the details of a more limited time span or of a particular experience. For example, an interviewer might ask a vice principal to reconstruct the details of a particular disciplinary session with a student; or an interviewer might ask a teacher to talk about the experience of a particular conference with a parent.

A second type of open-ended question focuses more on the subjective experience of the participant than on the external structure. For example, a participant might begin to talk about her experience in a parent conference. After asking her what happened at the conference, the interviewer might ask her to talk about what that conference was like for her.

Although there are many approaches to open-ended questioning, when I am interested in understanding the participant's subjective experience, I often find myself asking the question, "What was that like for you?" As Schutz (1967) indicated, it is not possible to experience what the participant experienced. If we could, then we would be the participant. Perhaps the closest we can come is to ask the metaphorical question implied in the word *like.* When interviewers ask what something was like for participants, they are giving them the chance to reconstruct their experience according to their own sense of what was important, unguided by the interviewer. (For a thoughtful discussion of questioning strategies she uses in oral history interviewing, see Yow, 1994, pp. 38–44.)

FOLLOW UP, BUT DON'T INTERRUPT

Avoid interrupting participants when they are talking. Often an interviewer is more interested in something a participant says than the speaker seems to be. While the participant continues talking, the interviewer feels strongly tempted to interrupt to pursue the interesting point. Rather than doing so, however, the interviewer can jot down the key word and follow up on it later, when doing so will not interrupt the participant's train of

thought. The opportunity may come later in the same interview or even in a subsequent one (Richardson et al., 1965).

Once, for example, a teacher had been talking early in the second interview about the frenetic pace of her day and about having no place to hide. At the time, I was very interested in what she said, but she went right on to other aspects of her experience. Rather than interrupting her then, I wrote down in my working notes the phrases "frenetic pace" and "no place to hide."

Later, when there was a pause in her responses, I returned to those phrases by saying, "A while back you talked about a very frenetic pace. You talked about coming in the door, teaching your class, walking to your office, keeping extensive hours, having no place to hide. Would you talk more about that frenetic pace and having no place to hide?" (Richardson et al. [1965, pp. 157–163] term this approach "the echo" and caution against its overuse. Weiss [1994, pp. 77–78], however, says that it is important to return to words and phrases that serve as "markers" of something that may be very important to a participant, but for which you might not want to interrupt at the time.)

The participant responded by talking about the effect of her community college's architecture on her daily life. In order to make faculty as accessible as possible to students, the designers of her campus had made the wall of faculty offices that faced the hallway of glass. The participant spoke about her frustration with never having a place to go in her building where she could get some work done without being seen and, most likely, interrupted. Although she could close the door of her office, she could never close out those who sought her.

TWO FAVORITE APPROACHES

Every interviewer probably develops favorite approaches to participants. I have two to which I return often.

Ask Participants to Talk to You as if You Were Someone Else

I use the first approach when I sense that I am hearing a public voice and I am searching for an inner one (see above). In those situations, I often use what Patton (1989) calls role-playing questions (see also Spradley, 1979). I try to figure out the person with whom the participant might be

most comfortable talking personally. I then try asking the participant to imagine that I am that person.

I might say, "If I were your spouse (or your father, or your teacher, or your friend), what would you say to me?" Sometimes this question falls flat. I am unable to shift the participant's frame of reference enough so that he or she talks to me as though I were someone else. But often, if used sparingly, the role-playing approach works. The participant takes on a different voice, becomes animated in a way that he or she has not been until then, and both the participant and I enjoy for a few moments the new roles that we have assumed.

Ask Participants to Tell a Story

I also often ask participants to tell me a story about what they are discussing. In a sense, everything said in an interview is a story. But if a participant were talking about, for example, relationships with students, I might ask for a story about one particular student who stands out in his or her experience.

Not everybody is comfortable with being asked directly to tell a story. The request seems to block people who may think they do not tell good stories or that story telling is something only other people do. Others, however, suddenly remember a particular incident, become deeply engrossed in reconstructing it, and tell a wonderful story that conveys their experience as concretely as anything could.

I will always remember the story one student teacher told when she was describing the trouble she was having figuring out how to relate to her students. She had envisioned herself as a friendly older sister to them. One day she overheard a group of her students telling dirty jokes, and she told them a mild one.

About a week later, the vice principal called her to his office to say that parents were outraged about the joke. The student teacher went on to tell of a series of meetings with parents in which she had to explain herself. She described the vice principal's lack of real support during those meetings. Finally she talked about the sobering realization that she had not known where to draw the line with her students. She said, "The dirty joke was horrendous, and I understood that. I understood that I was just trying to be one of the kids, that I felt close to them. . . . I was just being too familiar. I always thought that teaching . . . was relating to the kids."

Stories such as this, in which the student teacher gave a beginning, middle, and end to a segment of her experience, drew characters, pre-

sented conflict, and showed how she dealt with it, convey experience in an illuminating and memorable way. (See Mishler, 1986, chap. 4, for an extended discussion of the power of narratives, and Mattingly, 1998, chaps. 1 and 2 for the complexities of stories and narratives.) If an interviewer continually asks participants to illustrate experiences with a story, the technique will wear out quickly. Used sparingly, however, and targeted at particular aspects of the participant's experience, it can lead to treasured moments in interviewing.

ASK PARTICIPANTS TO RECONSTRUCT, NOT TO REMEMBER

Avoid asking participants to rely on their memories. As soon as interviewers ask if people remember something, impediments to memory spring up (Tagg, 1985). Ask participants, in effect, not to remember their experience but rather to reconstruct it. Ask directly "What happened?" or "What was your elementary school experience like?" instead of "Do you remember what your elementary school experience was like?"

Interviewers can assume that the participants will be able to reconstruct their experience and thereby avoid many of the impediments to memory that abound. Reconstruction is based partially on memory and partially on what the participant now senses is important about the past event. In a sense, all recall is reconstruction (Thelen, 1989). In interviewing, it is better to go for that reconstruction as directly as possible.

KEEP PARTICIPANTS FOCUSED AND ASK FOR CONCRETE DETAILS

Keep participants focused on the subject of the interview. If they begin to talk about current experience in the first interview, try to guide them back to the focus of that interview, which is to provide contextual background from their life story. Although the interviewer must avoid a power struggle, he or she must offer enough guidance in the process so that participants can come to respect the structure and individual purpose of each of the three interviews in the series.

Throughout the interviews, but especially in the first two, ask for concrete details of a participant's lived experience before exploring attitudes and opinions about it. The concrete details constitute the experience; attitudes and opinions are based on them. Without the concrete details, the attitudes and opinions can seem groundless.

DO NOT TAKE THE EBBS AND FLOWS OF INTERVIEWING TOO PERSONALLY

Watch for an ebb and flow in interviews and try not to take it too personally. In-depth interviewing often surprises participants because they have seldom had the opportunity to talk at length to someone outside their family or friends about their experience. As a result, they may become so engrossed in the first interview that they say things that they are later surprised they have shared (Spradley, 1979; Kirsch, 1999). Interviewers often arrive at the second interview thinking what a wonderful interview the first was, only to be surprised that now the participants pull back and are not willing to share as much as before. (Young & Lee, 1996, identify a similar phenomenon; see p. 106.) At this point, interviewers have to be careful not to press too hard for the type of sharing they experienced before. The third interview allows participants to find a zone of sharing within which they are comfortable. They resolve the issue for themselves.

LIMIT YOUR OWN INTERACTION

Only Share Experiences Occasionally

There are times when an interviewer's experience may connect to that of the participant. Sharing that experience in a frank and personal way may encourage the participant to continue reconstructing his or her own in a more inner voice than before. Overused, however, such sharing can distort an interview and distract participants from their own experience to the interviewer's. I can remember sharing stories of mine that I thought connected to what the participant was saying and sensing that the participant was impatient for me to stop talking. (For a somewhat different perspective on the amount of interaction that is desirable between interviewer and participant, see Oakley, 1981.)

Avoid Reinforcing Your Participants' Responses

Avoid reinforcing what your participant is saying, either positively or negatively. A useful training exercise is to transcribe verbatim 5 minutes of an early interview. What sometimes becomes clear is that the interviewer is in the habit of saying "uh huh" or "OK" or "yes" or some other short affirmative response to almost every statement from the participant. Sometimes interviewers are hardly aware that they are doing it.

On having such reinforcement called to their attention, many new interviewers suggest that there is nothing inappropriate about the practice. They argue that it shows they are listening and being attentive and that participants appreciate knowing that; it keeps them talking. Often, I think, it is a relatively benign controlling mechanism that is difficult to give up.

But interviewers who reinforce what they are hearing run the risk of distorting how the participant responds. A more effective and less invasive method is to refer later in an interview to something participants said earlier. (For a more balanced perspective on reinforcements, see Richardson et al., 1965.)

EXPLORE LAUGHTER

Often a participant will say something and then laugh, sometimes because what he or she just said is self evidently funny. At other times, the laughter may be nervous or ironic, its origin unclear to the interviewer and often worth exploring. For example, when interviewing a female science teacher, I asked her how the fact that there were 10 women in her community college science division of 60 faculty affected her sense of power in the college. I related the question to Rosabeth Moss Kanter's discussion of numbers and power in her book, *Men and Women of the Corporation* (1977). The participant responded:

> Well, you see this isn't a corporation. I mean, people are not jockeying for position within, and that would make a tremendous difference, I think, if we were really competitive with one another for something, [laugh] it might be a tremendously important factor. But we're not competing for anything. There are very few people who want to, say, go up to the next step, which is division director. I feel I could get elected to division director, if I so chose. [Pause] My sex would not at all interfere. [Pause] It might even be a plus, but, uh, most people here are not interested, it's not a power play situation; we're all retired really [laugh]. (Interview in Seidman et al., 1983)

After she finished and I weighed in my mind the juxtaposition of her laughter with what she was saying, I said, "That sounds bitter." In reply, she spoke about the positive and negative aspects in her experience of not being in a highly competitive, upwardly mobile faculty. I did not follow up at that point because I thought doing so might make her defensive. I wrote in my working notes, "laughter?" and came back to it later

in the interview. As Studs Terkel has said, "A laugh can be a cry of pain, and a silence can be a shout" (Parker, 1996, p. 165).

FOLLOW YOUR HUNCHES

Follow your hunches. Trust your instincts. When appropriate, risk saying what you think or asking the difficult question. Sometimes during an interview, a question will start to form, perhaps first as a vague impression, then as a real doubt. My experience is that it is important to trust those responses, to figure out the question that best expresses them, and to ask it.

During one interview with an intern teacher, I became increasingly uncomfortable. I could not figure out what was bothering me until I realized that the participant was talking positively about his teaching experience in a very formal way but with very little energy. His nonverbal language was contradicting his verbal language. I began to think he was really very unhappy with his teaching, even though he was talking relatively positively about it.

I was very uncomfortable with this hunch, but finally after we were more than two thirds of the way into the second interview, I said to him, "You know, I can't figure this out. You are talking as though you are enjoying your teaching, but something about the way you are talking makes me think you are not. Is that fair?"

He responded as though I had opened a floodgate. He began to talk about how angry he was that intern teachers got all the "lowest" classes. He said that even though he had solid math preparation, he would not have a chance to teach upper-level courses for perhaps 5 more years, because all course assignments were made on the basis of seniority. Then he talked about how hard he worked, how little time he had on weekends to be with his wife, and how little money he was making. As a result of following up on a hunch, I gained a completely different picture of his experience, and in the rest of the interview his verbal and nonverbal language coincided.

USE AN INTERVIEW GUIDE CAUTIOUSLY

Some forms of interviewing depend on an interview guide. (See, e.g., Yow, 1994.) The interviewers arrive with preset questions to which they want answers or about which they want to gather data. In-depth inter-

viewing, however, is not designed to test hypotheses, gather answers to questions, or corroborate opinions. Rather, it is designed to ask participants to reconstruct their experience and to explore their meaning. The questions most used in an in-depth interview follow from what the participant has said.

Nonetheless, in-depth interviewers may want to develop an interviewing guide. The basic structure of the interview is the question that establishes the focus of each interview in the series. However, interviewers never come into an interview situation as clean slates. They have interests, or they would not have chosen the research topic they did. In addition, some participants will require more prompting than others to go forward in the reconstruction of their experience. Also, over the course of a number of interviews, the interviewer may notice that several participants have highlighted a particular issue, and the interviewer may want to know how other participants would respond to that issue.

For these reasons, in our study of the experience of student teachers we developed a guide that listed the following areas: student teachers' relationship with mentors, with students, with other student teachers, with parents, with tracking, testing, and grading. In most cases, student teachers raised these topics on their own as they talked about their teaching experience. In those instances when they did not, and if there was an opportunity to do so without interrupting or diverting a participant's reconstruction of his or her own experience, the interviewer referred to the interview guide and raised an issue that had not been touched upon.

If interviewers decide to use an interview guide, they must avoid manipulating their participants to respond to it. Interviewers should ask questions that reflect areas of interest to them in an open and direct way, perhaps acknowledging that the question comes more from their own interest than from what the participant has said. Interviewers must try to avoid imposing their own interests on the experience of the participants. Interviewers working with an interview guide must allow for the possibility that what may interest them or other participants may be of little interest to the person being interviewed. Interview guides can be useful but must be used with caution. (For the development of interview guides, see Weiss, 1994, pp. 45–51.)

TOLERATE SILENCE

Interviewers sometimes get impatient and uncomfortable with silence. They project that discomfort onto their participants. They see

pauses as voids and jump into the interview with a quick question to fill the void. A useful exercise is to play back an interview tape and record how much time the interviewer gives the participant to think before he or she jumps in with a question. My experience is that new interviewers think they are waiting a considerable time before asking their next question, but when we go over audiotapes of their interviews, we determine that in reality they are waiting only a second or two. Thoughtfulness takes time; if interviewers can learn to tolerate either the silence that sometimes follows a question or a pause within a participant's reconstruction, they may hear things they would never have heard if they had leapt in with another question to break the silence. (See Mary-Budd Rowe, 1974, on the effect of how much time teachers wait for answers to questions on the quality of students' responses.)

On the other hand, Yow (1994, p. 63) and Gordon (1987) point out that too long a studied silence on the part of the interviewer can put undue pressure on the participant. The interviewer's staying silent too long can turn a "pregnant or permissive pause" into an "embarrassing silence" (Gordon, 1987, pp. 423, 426).

As in other aspects of interviewing, there is a delicate balance between jumping in too soon with a question and waiting too long in silence. There are no rules of thumb here. It is important to give your participant space to think, reflect, and add to what he or she has said. This may take a second or two for some participants and 20 seconds for others.

CONCLUSION

There is no recipe for the effective question. The truly effective question flows from an interviewer's concentrated listening, engaged interest in what is being said, and purpose in moving forward. Sometimes an important question will start out as an ill-defined instinct or hunch, which takes time to develop and seems risky to ask. Sometimes the effective question reflects the interviewer's own groping for coherence about what is being said and is asked in a hesitant, unsure manner.

Effective questioning is so context-bound, such a reflection of the relationship that has developed between the interviewer and the participant, that to define it further runs the risk of making a human process mechanical. To some extent, the way interviewers are as people will be the way they are as interviewers. If interviewers are the sort of people who always have to be talking, who never listen, who demand to be the center of attention most of the time, who are really not interested

in other people's stories, no matter what procedures they follow in interviewing, those characteristics will probably pervade the interviewing relationship.

The most important personal characteristic interviewers must have is a genuine interest in other people. They must be deeply aware that other people's stories are of worth in and of themselves as well as for the usefulness of what they offer to interviewers' research. With a temperament that finds interest in others, a person has the foundation upon which to learn the techniques of interviewing and to practice its skills.