

INTERVIEW 2 – WRITEUP AND REFLECTION

PART 1: WRITEUP

R is an engineering professor at a large research university who has done qualitative research on design thinking in engineering for nearly a decade. The prompt for the interview was reading T's one-page narrative and responding to it with a teaching story from R's own career, an experience wherein a colleague's sudden absence at the start of a term forced R and another professor to take over teaching that professor's class (which was not in their area of specialty) with only a few days of preparation time atop their other duties.

This interview was the longest I conducted in my pilot studies (spanning nearly an hour) and was divided into a “storytelling” part at the beginning and a “member check” part at the end in which the contents from the storytelling section were reviewed and analyzed in-situ by both myself and R. My analysis assignments focused largely on R's reaction to live-transcription and grounded indigenous coding, but for this writeup I will focus on the “storytelling” section in order to be able to weave R's interview in with T's and the document analysis in the final data story.

The primary theme of R's interview (as stated by R during the “member check” section of the interview) is the “big magic book that has all the answers ,” a resource “written as if it were meant to be shared” by multiple teachers of the class, whether they are co-instructors (teaching the same class together in the same semester) or a handoff of a class from one instructor to another. The “big book” theme itself was inspired by a section in T's interview describing a “CD of previous things past TAs had done,” but during the course of the interview, it became apparent that the “big book” was not simply a collection of reading materials for use with the class; it was a tool for communicating the structure and intent for student learning in the class – learning objectives, notes on coordinating teaching practices, and so forth.

As the discussion progressed, several questions on the nature of the “big book” were considered. Did the “big book” need to have a particular format or form? No, because R described one “big book” as being purely digital/online. Did the “big book” need to be readable by external

audiences? R was contradictory on this point; at the beginning of the interview, the descriptions of the “big book” are very much that of a trail guide left behind for subsequent hikers to discover, and – like a trail guide – needed to be understandable by the hikers who picked it up when standing in an isolated lodge without the ability to talk with the author.

However, R later described a case study of a high-quality “big book” experience as “not meant for consumption really beyond us [the original authors],” followed by a description of the “big book” as “the place where we wrote checking if we were all on the same page.” This expanded the definition of the “big book” to be a more general communication tool that could be context-rich or context-free, meant for internal or external consumption or anywhere in between. I therefore interpret R's complaint about the lack of a “big book” for the course that was the subject interview as a critique of the existing “big book.” In other words, it was the lack of a “big book” *that R considered usable* in the specific instructional situation that was the complaint, rather than a statement that no “big book” at all existed for the course. (The same “big book” accompanied by conversations with the original instructor may have been perfectly adequate.)

In this expanded definition, the “big book” might be a standalone artifact meant to be transmitted to someone at a far geographic and chronological distance without any discussions or shared context between author and user, as in K-12 curriculum binders, or it may be a co-created artifact borne out of discussions and largely unusable by anyone but the original authors and participants in those discussions.

Towards the end of the interview (both storytelling and member-check), R and I began reflecting on the “big book” on potentially being a myth – was there such a thing, or was the “big book” a wish for a magic wand that would deliver its bearer from the process of wrestling with making a class one's own? The key quote for me was this (from R):

“If there was a Big Book of “this is how to teach the class,” I don't know if I would have necessarily gone “ah, here is the recipe.” I probably still would have tried to figure out what were the big ideas...Ultimately I had to make it my own.”

The “big book” then becomes something that comes “out of the process” of instructors sitting down with materials, ideas, and potentially each other – an artifact that captures aspects of that process in a way that's useful to the instructor, whatever that may mean to that particular instructor for that course at that particular point in time.

PART 2: REFLECTION

Of all the data I collected this semester, the interview with R spurred the most reaction and commentary both from myself and from those I discussed the data with. I believe this was in part a snowball effect enabled by the permission I got from R to share the interview materials (and eventually share them with full identifiers) – as I found more things in it, I could share those insights with others, who had their own ideas, and thus gave me more ideas, and so forth.

R was a contributor to that snowball effect as well. In fact, you could say that R kicked it off as my first co-analyst during the “member check” portion of our interview. It was R who first identified and named the theme of “big book” running through the story (although a focus on the “big book” idea meant that we did not examine other potential themes in the interview due to limited time). As I heard other people comment on R's story, I would mention their comments to R (who I knew would be interested) the next time we passed on campus – accidental member-checks of a sort rather than deliberately planned ones. (However, I recognized and was intentional about taking the opportunity for accidental member-checks, so it wasn't *completely* unplanned.)

Why did this happen for R and not for T? I saw both R and T on a roughly weekly basis, but my professional involvement with R had a longer history and included projects beyond this interview, which may have made me more eager to share comments with R. I also was fairly sure R would react with great excitement, as our interview topic of curricular change was also one of R's research interests, whereas T's interview was an aside to T's everyday research in social psychology.

Since engaging storytelling participants in the analysis of their own stories is something I want to be central to my dissertation research, I will need to ensure that my subjects are actually interested in digging deeper into their understandings of their own stories; ideally, they will be seeking self-knowledge and open to that knowledge coming in many forms, from many places, and including input they may disagree with or even be offended by (especially critiques of their own character or practice that may not be politely phrased). I believe the participants I have recruited for my dissertation fit this criteria, but it will be interesting to see how it plays out in practice.

Another note is that – as you may have noticed, and as I have pointed out before – I hid the genders of both R and T in these writeup and in the one-page “interview prompt” versions that were summaries of their interviews composed almost entirely of verbatim quotes from the interviewees. This was originally unconscious, but when one of the colleagues I discussed the data with assumed that R was male, I did a double-take: *wait, I did do that.* (R and T are both female.)

This led to a discussion with that colleague about the basis behind her assumptions of the gender of both R and T, and whether I should have disclosed that information to her beforehand. My colleague was of mixed feelings: on the one hand, she felt “guilty” for getting the gender of R wrong because she had assumed that bold criticism (by R of the inadequate materials left behind by her teaching predecessor) was a male characteristic, as well as confidence (on R's part that she would be able to figure out a way to teach the class anyway). On the other hand, the gender had clearly affected her interpretations of their actions. I'll need to consider what I want to do about this in my final study design.