Education Futures ACADEMY

Responsive Interviewing Model: A Framework

Understanding qualitative interviewing

In recent decades, research on interviewing has come to consider the interview as a social interaction whereby the interviewer and participant – or 'conversational partner' (CP) – come together in a space of reciprocity to co-create meaning (Foley, 2012; Rubin & Rubin, 2004). Through qualitative interviews, researchers gather rich, in-depth insights by engaging in purposeful conversations that explore CPs' experiences and perspectives in their everyday settings. We develop a space for CPs to share their knowledge and experiences in a way that guides the conversation based on their responses, but only in as far as they are comfortable and/or willing to disclose (Rubin & Rubin, 2004, p. 4). As such, each qualitative interview is unique and is generally designed to be flexible and dynamic, enabling researchers to adapt questions and probes in response to the CP's unique insights and areas of interest. This iterative nature of qualitative interviewing can also assist in uncovering cultural understandings, invisible norms or even hidden meanings that CPs may not initially recognise. And although qualitative interviews and ordinary conversations share commonalities, for instance, turn-taking and the use of questions and answers which logically follow on from one other, it is worth noting that qualitative interviewing demands skills beyond the normal conventions of managing a conversation. Rubin and Rubin (2004) note that these skills include:

- Being able to craft questions that align with the research topic
- Persuading people to be interviewed
- Assessing when and how to trust a CP's response
- Deciding how specific a question should be
- Evaluating whether the wording of a question or statement is too biased
- Encouraging CPs to elaborate on what they say
- Synthesising different narratives of the same event
- Determining when to take on-scene notes versus relying on memory
- Choosing between the use of an audio recorder or a video camera (p. 13)

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Despite researchers' best intentions to develop conversational styles of interview, Foley (2012) suggests that the pedagogy of interviewing often remains 'interviewer centred'. To support us to shift away from an interviewer-centric pedagogy, we need an approach which emphasises deep engagement with our CPs and allows us to remain responsive to their experiences. It follows that in most instances in the Education Futures Academy, we will adopt Rubin and Rubin's (2004) responsive interviewing (RI) model. According to Rubin and Rubin (2004), RI refers to an extended conversation that maintains a continuous flow of connected topics which at times may dip into the use of narratives and stories (pp. 108-109). The RI model is a reflexive approach that aims to create a naturalistic and informal, but in-depth encounter between researcher and CP, otherwise known as a guided conversation. Thus, the aim of RI is 'thick description' which refers to the 'way researchers immerse themselves in a culture, investigate the particular circumstances present in that scene, and only then move toward grander statements and meanings' (Tracy, 2020, p. 3).

Why it matters how we call those we interview

Interviewees are often referred to by a host of labels in research, with the more popular ones generally being 'respondents', 'participants' and 'subjects', or if we're moving to more specific positions that the interviewer might occupy in for example, an educational context, then it may even be 'leader', 'student', 'learner', 'school services officer' or 'teacher'. In a similar way that Biesta (2010) argues it matters how we refer to those we teach, we can also assert that how we label our interviewees in qualitative research carries significant implications. Referring to interviewees as 'conversational partners' is not simply a semantic choice; it shapes our approach to and the relationship and the dynamics of the interaction we have with them. As Biesta (2010) suggests, words are connected to other words, creating pathways of meaning that influence how we perceive and engage with others. By using the reference term 'conversational partners', we acknowledge the active, collaborative role of our interviewees, positioning them as equal participants in the research process, rather than passive subjects. This choice of language creates a more respectful and reciprocal relationship, aligning with Biesta's (2010) view that words shape 'ways of saying, ways of doing, and ways of being' in educational and research contexts (p. 540).

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Research paradigms: shaping inquiry and methodological choices

Paradigms represent a particular way of thinking – a 'school of thought' – that is shared by a research community (Pabel, Pryce & Anderson, 2021, p. 5). Paradigms account for the philosophical underpinnings or frameworks for 'what should be studied, what is seen and how what is seen is interpreted or understood' (Killion & Fisher, 2018, p. 11).
Although research paradigms can be defined in multifarious ways, Pabel, Pryce and Anderson (2021) observe that they are frequently distinguished by the following four principles:

- **Ontology** – is concerned with questions around what constitutes reality, existence or being; that is, what do we believe about the nature of reality?
- **Epistemology** – considers questions around what counts as knowledge and truth, and how people come to know it, i.e. how do we know what we know and what sources of knowledge are reliable?
- **Axiology** – is concerned with questions around ethics and value systems; that is, what do we believe is true in terms of moral choices, ethics and normative judgements?
- **Methodology** – guides the researcher towards the use of appropriate approaches of enquiry; that is, how should we study the world? (p. 6)

There are many research paradigms that guide how research communities approach inquiry – e.g., positivism, constructionism, interpretivism, post-structuralism, pragmatism, critical theory, phenomenology and post-modernism to name just a few. The point here is that the research methods must align with the paradigm that frames our research. To ensure there is alignment, we need a clear understanding of the research community we identify with. For instance, a researcher working within a positivist paradigm – where objectivity, quantitative methods and the belief in a single 'measurable' reality are central – would not typically use responsive interviewing which is rooted in more interpretive approaches.

Rubin and Rubin (2004) explain that the RI model aligns with the interpretivist paradigm, but at times may also lapse into critical theory when we work to challenge power structures, expose inequalities and/or advocate for social change.

Interpretivism is concerned with understanding subjective meanings, social contexts and lived experiences and as such, look for the 'specific and detailed and try to build an understanding based on those specifics' (Rubin & Rubin, 2004, p. 28). For RI, this means developing depth conversations that capture personal meanings as portrayed in the language of our CPs (Denicolo & Lathlean, 2022). Denicolo and Lathlean (2022) explain that this approach seeks the emic perspective: 'how participants perceive and categorise their worlds, what has meaning for them how they explain their beliefs and behaviour' (p. 3).

Given the interpretivist approach, we are not then concerned with conventional positivist criteria such as validity and reliability of the interview data. Denicolo and Lathlean (2022) suggest that interpretivist researcher responsibility lies more with authenticity. While authenticity can never be 'fully guaranteed', interpretivist researchers must undertake due diligence to refrain from divorcing interpretations from the research context. Authentic findings are then those 'that are contextualised and credible to the participants', however 'the methods and findings should be transferable to other ostensibly similar situations to check on degree of similarity' (Denicolo & Lathlean, 2022, p. 3).

1. Developing an interview style: question preparation

Responsive interviewing recognises that interviewers are people with personalities, feelings, interests and diverse experiences, and hence cannot be expected to serve as a passive or neutral instrument (Rubin & Rubin, 2004). Each person's unique personality and style means that they will approach and undertake interviews differently. The interviewer must be self-aware, meaning being able to examine our own biases, assumptions and expectations that may influence our line of questioning and/or our CP's responses. We can start to understand our stylistic approach to interviewing by exploring how we might go about interview question preparation. Adapted from Rubin and Rubin (2004), the approaches to question preparation often fall into three broad categories:

1. **Methodical approach** – write down all main questions, carefully working through and noting possible follow-up questions and then mentally or physically crossing off all questions during the interview
2. **Flexible approach** – write down a broad set of questions that you want to cover
3. **Spontaneous approach** – rely on memory and formulate the questions as the interview proceeds

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Although Rubin and Rubin (2004) do not advocate for a particular preparation style in RI, to adapt to and guide the interview into purposeful conversation, there needs to be an element of flexibility or spontaneity in our approach. In the context of our own interviews, this means ascertaining a certain level of mastery to work more confidently in the latter two categories. Practicing and testing the intended questions for the interview with a peer prior can help to both trial the line of questioning and support skills in flexibility and spontaneity, furnishing the researcher with an opportunity to 'explore language, the clarity of the questions, and aspects of active listening' (McGrath, Palmgren & Liljedahl, 2018, p. 1003).

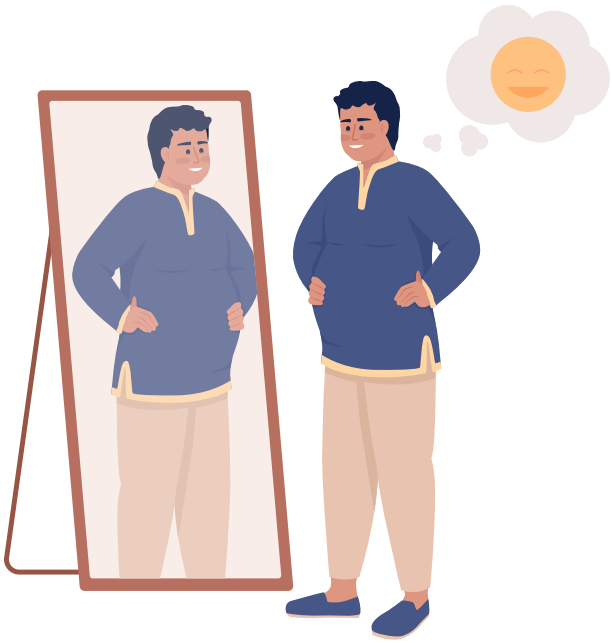
2. Conceptual preparation: reviewing literature

Although often overlooked or assumed in qualitative interviewing literature, the conceptual preparation involved in reviewing the relevant background literature on the interview's subject matter should not be underestimated. Being familiar with the relevant literature in our research field helps us gain a deeper understanding of the key concepts, shaping how we design our questions, determining which angles to explore and asking more pertinent follow-up or probing questions. Hence, good practice involves identifying a key set of literature that will be used to guide the inquiry and researcher's understanding.

3. Engaging in self-reflection and auto-critique

Understanding our preparation approach is an essential starting point for self-reflection, but to refine our practice and responsiveness, we must go deeper. Beyond preparation, we need to consider the factors that may enhance or hinder our engagement with our CPs. While self-critique is valuable pre- and post-interview, it is equally important to remain self-aware during the interview itself. As interviewers, we should continuously reflect on the following:

- How would I describe my personality and how does it shape my interview style?
- What personal biases or strong personal feelings do I have in relation to a particular topic? How might these influence my reactions and my CP's responses?
- When do I experience discomfort in an interview, and what does this reveal about my approach?
- Am I comfortable redirecting or challenging my CP when necessary? If not, why not?
- Do I steer the conversation toward my own perspectives or opinions?
- Do I focus too intensely on certain topics, and if so, what drives this tendency?
- Am I overly empathetic and could this affect the depth or direction of the interview? Conversely, am I too direct and how might this influence my CP's comfort and willingness to share?
- Am I allowing CPs the space and time to tell the story they want to tell? (This is particularly important when interviewing people from less powerful positions – such as young people – and marginalised groups)
- Do I accept too much at face value without probing further?
- Is anything external – whether personal or professional – affecting my focus in going into this interview?
- What preconceptions might I be bringing into this conversation and how could they shape the interaction?



4. Considering power dimensions – see McGrath et al.

When considering power dimensions in RI, it's essential to recognise the inherent power imbalance between researcher and CP. While both participants engage in a conversation, the interviewer typically holds more influence over the flow of the discussion, the topics that are explored and the framing of the questions. This power dynamic can shape the data collected and CP's responses. Given this asymmetry, it is crucial for us as researchers to remain conscious of our influence and approach the process with ethical responsibility (Tracy, 2020). This includes ensuring that our CP feels respected, heard and not coerced, while also safeguarding the integrity of the data gathered by minimising interviewer bias and maintaining transparency throughout the process.

Equally important is considering the cultural context and how it intersects with power dynamics. Prior to conducting an interview, an assessment of both power and cultural dimensions is necessary. People come from diverse cultural backgrounds and their
expectations of the interview process may differ significantly. For some, the interview may be viewed as an intrusive or high-stakes interaction, especially if there are significant cultural or social hierarchies at play (McGrath, Palmgren & Liljedahl, 2019). Moreover, both explicit and implicit power dynamics must be acknowledged: leaders interviewing teachers or vice versa, for example, may bring unique power struggles into the conversation, requiring special care to ensure that neither party feels compelled to provide 'correct' or socially desirable responses.

5. Question design

As outlined by Lichtman (2023), questions fall into five different categories:

Grand tour	Specific/ concrete	Comparison/ contrast	New elements	Closing
Generalised questions to encourage respondent to talk at length.	Provides an opportunity for participant to be concrete and specific and provide relevant information. Ask about recent experience/s that are meaningful.	Challenges participant to think about other times, situations, places, events or people and draw comparisons between them.	Provides subtle shifts to a new topic.	Provides an opportunity for the participant to add any further detail not already covered.
E.g. "Tell me about ..."	E.g. "What did you observe in the CC10 program that indicates that there is ...?"	E.g. "How would you compare what you are doing now to what you did in the past?"	E.g. "We've talked for a while about ... but are there other aspects of ... that you would like to discuss?"	E.g. "Is there anything else you would like to add to what you have already said?"

6. Chasing knowledge through questioning strategies

Lichtman (2023) sets out six questioning strategies that can be used to generate discussion with CPs and reveal what they think about a topic:

Elaboration	Probing	Neutral	Single question	Wait time	Special areas
Expand ideas	Elicit more information	Maintain non-directionality	Ask only one	Allow silence, pauses	Listen; don't assume

Figure 1: Questioning strategies (Lichtman, 2023, p. 362)

A framework for conducting responsive interviews

Elaboration involves providing opportunities for our CP to expand on their initial ideas, e.g., "You mentioned that you feel happy about working with a new group of peers. What kinds of things have contributed to you feeling happy?"

Probing is a technique that allows the interviewer to explore the deeper meaning behind what is being said. Even when you think you understand the message, it's always beneficial to ask for clarification, as words can have various interpretations. You can do this by repeating what was said (echo probe), subtly signalling with a raised eyebrow (silent probe), or responding with a neutral sound like 'uh-huh' to encourage further explanation. Use probing questions to deepen understanding, such as:

- "Can you tell me more about that?"
- "I see. What do you mean when you say ...?"
- "What do you mean by ...?"
- "That's interesting, please go on."
- "What else can you say about ...?"
- "I'm not sure I understand when you say ... Can you explain this to me more fully?"
- "That's interesting, let's talk about that in more detail."
- "Can you give me an example of what you mean when you say ...?"
- "Do you think ... is important in ...? If so, in what ways?"
- "That sounds interesting. Please tell me more about ..."
- "X means different things to different people. I want to get at what it means to you. Tell me more about it."
- "Let's talk about ... Tell me about the experience."

The neutral questioning strategy requires the interviewer to remain impartial, not showing support nor opposition to a topic or response. It's important not to let your verbal or nonverbal signals sway the CP's responses. Although the researcher's perspective will have influence on the outcome, asking questions in a way that doesn't guide your CP in a particular way is a different approach. E.g., "We have talked about being a graduate teacher. What is the experience like for you?"

Use **single questions** that contain one idea rather than double-barrelled questions which can confuse CPs and contribute to them losing their train of thought.

Provide **wait time** after asking a question. After asking a question, remain quiet and neutral – for instance look at your notes or take a sip of water so that your CP feels that the focus is removed from them – to allow them time to think and then talk.

Special areas encourage CPs to tell their own story in their own words. E.g., "Tell me what you think about ..." or "Do you think ... is important in this school? If so, in what ways?"

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7. Talk less, listen more

Sometimes novice interviewers can feel nervous or feel pressed to fill the silence in interviews and as a result become overly active in the conversations (McGrath, Palmgren & Liljedahl, 2018). Actively listening means respecting the silence, maintaining interest in our CPs and even talking less to allow for silence to act as a catalyst in driving the conversation forward. Remember, CPs are at times coming into these interviews unfamiliar of what you will ask and may feel uncertain or hesitant to speak at first. By embracing silence, we as interviewers create space for CPs to gather their thoughts, reflect and express themselves more freely. This not only helps to establish a more comfortable and open environment but also encourages deeper, more thoughtful conversation. In this way, silence becomes a powerful tool, allowing the interview to unfold naturally and nurture a sense of trust between the interviewer and the CP.

8. Conducting the interview

Lichtman (2023) suggests that there are three parts to an interview: (1) Preliminaries, (2) The Body of the Interview, and (3) Closing (p. 275).

Preliminaries (prior to recording):

1. Create a comfortable environment. Begin with a brief, informal conversation to build rapport and allow the CP feel at ease.
2. Reiterate that their anonymity will be protected – this can be an extremely important reminder for those who may be concerned that their responses could be relayed to a person of influence, e.g., a university tutor/lecturer, a line manager or program coordinator/organiser.
3. Informed consent – Remind your CP of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, pass on any of the questions that you may pose or stop the interview without any personal or academic impact. Check for consent to record the interview and advise when you are about to begin.
4. Ask if they have any questions before you proceed and check that they are comfortable.

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The Body of the Interview

1. Clearly communicate the purpose of the interview, i.e., connections to your research and explain to your CP that they are welcome to ask questions as well as the conversation unfolds.
2. Remind them that their insights and lived experiences are important for this research and work to continually position them as the 'expert'. Reiterate that there are no 'correct' responses to questions, instead you are interested in their experiences, thoughts, opinions and at times, emotions.
3. Work to build rapport across the body of the conversation. Rapport will help to generate meaningful and useful data (Lichtman, 2023, p. 276):
    a. Develop your own list for how you might develop this, e.g., relax shoulders, be accepting, if nervous take deep breaths etc.
    b. You should also try to practice self-disclosure. Share something about yourself that will help the participant to connect to you or vice versa. In other words, seek a personal/obvious connection with your CP and if you cannot find an obvious connection, then share a story of something that happened to you on your way to the interview (e.g., caught in traffic, getting lost) or something that occurred in the previous week. The point is that self-disclosure in the form of personal stories help to remove the power difference between researcher and CP, in a sense it is about 'being human and approachable, not aloof and on a higher plane' (Tracy, 2020, p. 276).

During the interview, you will need to continue to listen, adapt and respond:

- Use active listening techniques. Show genuine interest through eye contact, nodding and affirming responses. Use your eyes or eyebrows to indicate that you want the person to continue.
- Adjust questions as needed or reframe in another way if your CP does not appear to understand, they ask you what you mean, or the response requires clarification of meaning.
- Avoid interrupting your CP. Allow them to express their thoughts fully before responding or asking further or clarifying questions.

Closing

1. Explain that the conversation is drawing to a close.
2. Provide a few minutes to invite your CP to provide any additional information by asking:
    a. "Is there anything further that you would like to add?"
    b. "Is there anything that I didn't cover that you think is important?"
3. Close by thanking them for their time, reassuring them that their insights have been valuable and explaining the next process.

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