

Using Skype as a Research Tool: Lessons Learned from Qualitative Interviews with Distance Students in a Teacher-Librarianship Program

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Introduction

Interviews are a valuable research tool, particularly when researchers must understand participants' experiences in great depth. Historically, however, geographically disparate research participants have posed a challenge when conducting interviews for reasons relating to both time and expense. At the same time, although new technologies allow scholars and practitioners to study people at a distance, this has often been limited to questionnaire-type data (e.g., using Survey Monkey). Now, online interviews are becoming an increasingly viable research method and there are many data collection tools available to support this method. This presentation will present findings from one study that explored the information behaviors of university students enrolled in a teacher-librarianship program. The results are used to examine the potential for using Skype (and similar programs) as research tools in library and information studies.

Background

Only a few years ago, it may have been easier to conduct online interviews using text-based web technologies (e.g., email). However, increased bandwidth and the availability of inexpensive, easy-to-use technologies has made the potential to conduct online audio and video interviews more viable. Skype is one tool, available for free download, that provides its users with a range of communication options for research, including connecting with other Skype users, phoning landlines or mobile phones, as well as providing messaging and file transfer capabilities. As such, Skype offers researchers the opportunity to conduct inexpensive, synchronous online interviews. This presentation will examine how Skype was used to study the information behaviours of distance learning students, focusing on the limitations and advantages of this technology.

Skype and Research

To date, little research has considered Skype as a data collection tool, with researchers focusing typically on Skype as the object of study. This presentation will discuss a number of these studies (e.g., Booth, 2008), noting how their results can be used to inform the use of Skype as an online research tool for library and information science scholars and practitioners.

In this research study, Skype was used to interview distance learning students. Online interviews were ideal as the students resided in different Canadian cities and as the primary researcher was living in New Zealand. As a result, interviewing the students in a traditional face-to-face context would have been costly and time intensive. In addition, Kazmer & Xie (2008) point out that online interviews often work well when the research topic itself relates to the online context (e.g., online learning).

Fifteen students from an online teacher-librarianship program were interviewed to gain an understanding of their information behaviours for their academic work. The results were analyzed using a grounded theory approach to explore issues related to students' motivation to seek and share information in the online learning environment. The results highlighted the importance of academic relevance, the local context and culture on the information behaviors of online learning students. The results have implications for the design of library services to meet distance students' needs, as well as the design of online classroom interactions.

Opportunities & Challenges

Using Skype to conduct research interviews has numerous advantages: 1) it is inexpensive; 2) it is geographically flexible; 3) it is user-friendly and easy to install/use; 4) Skype has an instant messaging function, which is a useful tool for managing data collection problems and sharing information among participants; and, 5) ease of audio-recording is a key benefit, as researchers can easily record computer-to-computer and computer-to-telephone conversations. However, there are also a number of challenges that exist when using Skype: 1) there may be time lags in the conversation, which can break the flow of an interview; 2) when using Skype video, researchers must ensure that interviewer and interviewee can readily see non-verbal cues; 3) in audio-only mode, non-verbal communication is lost; and 4) the technology itself can fail, resulting in disconnection problems, loss of data, etc. In addition, with some participants in particular, ethical and technical issues may need to be managed, to ensure that individuals' rights are respected and that everyone feels comfortable participating in the study. All of these issues will be discussed in this paper.

Conclusion

As with all research tools, there are costs and benefits associated with the chosen approach. In the case of online interviews using Skype, one runs the risk of having a more stilted conversation with participants than in traditional face-to-face contexts. However, the software does enable interaction with participants who may be excluded in other studies because of, for example, their geographic location. As with all research tools, investigators must weigh the pros and cons; however, the results of this research project point to great potential for future use in library and information studies.

As the goal of this study was to understand the information seeking and sharing motivations of distance learning students, using a qualitative design, the research method needed to facilitate in-depth discussion of issues. For example, participants were asked why and how they used particular tools to seek information; they were also asked about motivations for sharing (or not sharing) information with their peers. Skype was selected as a research tool for reasons related to cost, ease of use, and geographic flexibility. It also enabled synchronous communication, which afforded greater intimacy –

and was a useful tool for students engaged in distance study, who were already familiar with online interaction.

In sum, this presentation will provide an overview of the online interview itself, followed by a discussion of how Skype can be used for future studies of user behavior and other, related topics. This presentation highlights key research questions and results to illustrate how this technology was used to explore information behaviors in a distance learning context. Examples from the 15 student interviews illustrate Skype's features, benefits, and limitations.

References

- Booth, C. (2008). Developing Skype-based reference services. *Internet Reference Services Quarterly*, 13, 147-165.
- Kazmer, M., & Xie, B. (2008). Qualitative interviewing in internet studies: Playing with the media, playing with the method. *Information, Communication, & Society*, 11, 257-278.