

**IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWING PRACTICE
IN POST-COMPULSORY VOCATIONAL
EDUCATION AND TRAINING
RESEARCH IN AUSTRALIA
FROM 1993 TO 2005**

by

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**CERTIFICATE
OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY**

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

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Prologue

Increasingly, qualitative researchers are realizing that interviews are not neutral tools of data gathering but active interactions between two or more people leading to negotiated, contextually based results.

(Fontana & Frey 2000, p.646)

To illustrate the interactional process of an interview I use an analogy from my childhood. I recall that as a child I would look at clean, fresh, inviting sheets of paper and wonder what words and drawings might ‘appear’ on that paper, being mindful that nothing would appear without action on my part.

How and why did a particular image appear? The images on those pages depended not only on the levels of my writing or drawing skills but also on particular trigger(s), the way I felt, what I was thinking about, my past life experiences, where I was as well as my knowledge of the subject. In addition, those images also depended on the other ‘actors’ (although I would not have used such a term way back then). These ‘other actors’ were the papers and the types of markers I used. If I had no previous experience of interacting with that particular paper or those particular pens or crayons, then I needed to adapt, modify, experiment and draw on knowledge acquired from other experiences.

It seemed to me that this was not very different from the interactional process of an in-depth interview. An interview conversation is to some extent the outcome of the combination of interpersonal skills, how I feel as the interviewer, what I am thinking about, where I am, my knowledge of the topic and my knowledge informed by my socio-cultural experience. However, if the other ‘actors’ - the respondents and the physical situation - (like the markers and the paper in my childhood), seem in anyway different from those I have previously experienced, I then adapt, modify, experiment and bring knowledge from my socio-cultural experience to the interview.

This thesis explores how one specific group of researchers describe their experiences as in-depth interviewers.

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Abstract

I came to this study as a practitioner/researcher/student, having worked as an educator in post-compulsory and vocational education and later as a research project officer required to conduct in-depth interviews. This thesis emerged from an awareness of the potential influence my (in)abilities to gather 'rich' interview data might have on research outcomes. How did other researchers/interviewers and I develop the appropriate abilities? What skills were involved and were there other factors? To examine such issues I located the study in my field of work – that of post-compulsory vocational education and training research (PCVETR) in Australia using accounts from individual in-depth research interviewers.

My eclectic research approach resulted in a reflexive mixed method interpretive study. The research design began with a document analysis of two international PCVETR peak publications published in Australia to ascertain the extent of usage of in-depth interviews by authors (CD of data included). The period from 1993 until 2005 showed a steady increase in the inclusion of articles/papers using in-depth interview data with a little over a third of all articles/papers in these publications using data from in-depth interviewing.

From the document analysis, eighteen researchers/authors were identified as having used in-depth interviews and were surveyed and interviewed about their research experiences and practices. These experiences were located in a time of change, both in PCVETR policy and systems and available research perspectives and methodologies thus providing a rich research context and a broad palette of research techniques.

In their perspectives on using in-depth interviewing the researchers demonstrated how they managed both routine and non-routine tasks. While none of these had been specifically trained as research interviewers they could discuss what experiences they had drawn on to develop their practice in in-depth interviewing and could provide advice for novice interviewers. From these findings, together with Kemmis' (2006) Features of Practice, I proposed a new conceptual framework for in-depth interviewing practice that included, but went beyond, core skills to represent the nature of in-depth interviewing practice within a PCVETR Community of Practice. The proposed conceptual framework encompassed three major influencing factors (i) contextual (meaning and purpose), (ii) organisational (temporal, systemic, structural) and (iii) individual (personal) factors.

I argued that any proposed training for in-depth interviewing in PCVETR should be conceptualised as being more than core skills. Training should also develop researchers' awareness of the potential influence of factors identified in the proposed conceptual framework for the practice of in-depth interviewing. Such training should enable researchers to take account of the underpinning meaning and purpose, the temporal location within an historical context, and evolving research methods pertaining to their practice as well as the skills and life and professional experiences they might bring to a research study.