Honouring Their Stories: 
The Experience of One Interviewer

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Communications, Energy and Paperworkers (CEP) Union. Funded by the Canadian Labour Force Development Board, National Literacy Secretariat, New Approaches to Lifelong Learning network at OISE, University of Toronto and the JUMP Project in British Columbia.

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I was contracted as one of three researchers for the project entitled Learning Capacities in the Community and Workplace: an action research project. The project was sponsored by Advocates for Community Based-training and Education for Women (ACTEW) and, initially, the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers (CEP) Union. The project was funded by the National Literacy Secretariat, the Canadian Labour Force Development Board, the New Approaches to Lifelong Learning Network and the JUMP Project in British Columbia. The intent of the project was to uncover and document learning strategies used by adults in three different learning sites: an unionized factory; a community-based employment training program; and a literacy program. I was to focus on learners in the pre-employment and literacy programs in Toronto. The method of research was action based: I was responsible for interviewing adult learners and facilitating sessions on filling out a Skills and Knowledge Profile.

The first challenge was to solicit interviewees who were willing to donate an hour or two of their time and experience of learning in return for a drink, possibly a light snack and sincere gratitude. In a climate where adults are burdened with familial, study and work responsibilities, available time is a rare commodity. However, seventeen gracious adult learners did volunteer their time and their stories. For the most part, the interviewees volunteered because they recognized the significance of donating their experience of and opinions on learning to the pedagogical constructs of adult education.

I walked into the position as an interviewer equipped with solid communication skills, a feminist understanding of subjectivity, and stacks of resources. After pouring over example questionnaires and transcripts from related interviews, I constructed a well thought out interview tool. I anticipated that the first few interviews would be rough and as I continued in the role, my interview skills and style would improve. In reality, as I interviewed learners, I continuously faced ambiguities around my role as interviewer. This piece is a compilation of my reflections on my role as the interviewer. As I interviewed volunteers, I maintained a journal of reflections and thoughts: much of the text in this article is excerpted from my journal entries.

As the interviewer, I was in full control of the interview from the onset. I understood the purpose of the encounter, I directed the questions, I recorded the conversation and I prescribed the amount of time. Together, we agreed on a date, time and meeting place, but otherwise the power of the interview was in my domain. Although I had an agenda of soliciting particular information, I was not intent on harnessing full control of the conversation; rather, I was hoping that the interview questions would inspire a free flowing discussion.
I approached my first interview with a basic understanding of the power dynamics and a vague grasp of what I was hoping to achieve. I did not expect to guide the perfect interview; I acknowledged that my first trial would be punctuated with mistakes that would later be improved upon. The interview was in her home; the surroundings belonged to her and not me. She had prepared for the meeting by baking a coffee cake. Because of the location, she had assumed some of the control of the interview and I felt comfortable with the changing power dynamic. As I directed questions, I realized that I was not just speaking to a woman who had learning experiences to share but a woman who spoke four languages, held numerous degrees, fled a civil war, and had been separated from her husband and young son for three years. Instead of pushing the project agenda forward, I was far more interested in hearing about her life challenges and experiences. The interview became a relaxed conversation which was periodically interrupted by a cry from her feverish daughter who was trying to sleep upstairs. Upon reflection about the first interview, I felt that I should follow the interview tool more closely and not cater to my personal interests. Only later, after the transcription of the interview was completed, did I realize that our conversation revealed her intricate attitudes and opinions on adult education, employment, language acquisition, motherhood, the arts, racism, and survival. Nevertheless, I felt a duty to uphold my position as the interviewer and so I intended to impose control on the direction of the future interviews.

My next few interviews followed a similar path as my first interview. Again, I did not find myself just interviewing adult learners; instead I found a young woman from St. Lucia who had immigrated to Canada alone; I found a middle aged woman who had left the corporate world to pursue a career in catering dietary meals for people with AIDS; and I found a woman who had been a staunch communist as a teen in Mauritius and later lived around the world. Unlike the first interview, all three interviews were conducted in a restaurant either over a meal or a snack. In all three interviews, I struggled with allowing the conversation to flow versus following the interview tool. The discussions would often follow an unrelated tangent and then I would occasionally try to redirect the discussion back to the interview tool. In the end, the control was shared, probably not equally, between myself and each interviewee.

As I interviewed more volunteers, my actual duties decreased. I was not compelled to animate the interview: the interviewees spoke eloquently about their life experiences while I became the active listener. Repeatedly my survey instrument failed as the map for the interview: instead, their rich employment, volunteer, school and life histories guided us through the interviews. I concluded that the problem was with the questionnaire: I turned to reworking the tool. I thought that if I could develop a better interview tool, I would no longer minimize its role and therefore feel more responsible as the hired interviewer.

In the next interview I planned to use the improved survey instrument. I intended to follow the questions and not deviate from the intent of the interview as I had done in the past. My contact arrived in the donut shop across the street from her place of employment no more than five minutes late, just after two in the afternoon. Minutes after
the interview started, she was in control and I had lost the status of detached observer. This time, I not only became the listener, but also the student, and she became the teacher. She answered each question with details that directly related to the question, and with her philosophies of life. I experienced a short inner struggle, "should I try to stick to the questions or should I abandon the prescribed role of interviewer and become the learner of her accomplishments?" I did not have to choose between the two because she did.

At one point, she asked me to turn off the tape recorder and then proceeded to expound on her relationship with her new male partner. She spoke about him with genuine relief, comfort and caution. She is a divorced mother of three who has fled a war, immigrated to a new country, learned a new language and remained a pillar of support and happiness for her family. Parts of the discussion were not captured for the research; the only two benefiting from the interview were her and I.

Immediately afterwards, I reflected on the pattern of the interview and finally accepted my particular style. I concluded that the strength of the interviews was rooted in my ability to relax the respondents and encourage conversation and not in the specifics of the questionnaire.

Unfortunately, the next two interviews did not yield the same results. I failed to connect with the respondents and consequently I was forced to follow the survey tool. Due to the ease of the previous interviews, I had become too comfortable in simply offering vague open-ended questions. I did not know how to frame the type of questions these particular respondents required. During the two interviews, I maintained hope that they would find away to narrate their experiences and relate it to the questions, and I would be allowed to slip back into my role of listener. I did not want to struggle with facilitation.

The experience of these two interviews undermined my confidence: I needed to learn how to guide an interview when there was a lack of connection. I pursued my next volunteer. We met in one location and decided to walk down Queen street and conduct the interview at another location. As we were walking, we casually talked about her co-op placement and which skills she was practising. Unlike the previous interviews, I was truly listening and asking questions that carried the conversation forward. I warned her that I might be repeating the same questions in the interview- she laughed. She had a very relaxed demeanor and I was successfully capitalizing on it. Once the interview started, a sense of anxiety set in and I lost my attentiveness. I was no longer asking the right questions to deepen the investigation. Her histories did not make up the same individual with whom I walked down Queen street. I tried to fuse the two individuals together. On the street, she was a woman who had worked for Children's Aid and has become familiar with child abuse issues. She was hoping to pursue a job in the social service industry. During the interview, she was a single mother that looked older than her years and who wanted to secure a job as an administrator to support herself and her daughter.
It had become clear to me that the lack of confidence distressed my ability to conduct an effective interview. I was eager to recuperate. I decided not only to rework the questionnaire but to become its ally. My goal was to use the survey tool and my ability to relax the interviewees in unison. The key, for me, was to approach each interview without an agenda around using the tool. Instead of focusing on my style during the interviews, I had to wholly be present in order to listen and ask the right questions. In addition, I had to part from the notion of the ideal interviewer and accept my style as legitimate.

In the course of this work, I was privileged to meet some courageous people. I met a woman from El Salvador who tried to prove her refugee status in the New York courts. I met a young woman with multiple university degrees who had taught science on a reservation in Northern Ontario and in a school of naturopathy and was currently looking for work to help support her family. I met four elderly immigrants from Guyana who spoke of a bitter past life with smiles and laughter. I met a man who had faced rejection from his family, the school system, employers and friends but commanded the courage and tenacity to study everyday to upgrade his reading and writing skills. I met a middle-aged woman labouring to support herself and her mother while holding on to the dream of becoming an artist. I met a woman who was caring for a newborn and a fifteen year old, upgrading her computer skills, struggling with a failing marriage and fearing an early death from cerebral cancer to which both of her parents had succumbed.

Altogether, I met seventeen intriguing individuals who shared their thoughts and struggles with a complete stranger. I often wondered why the volunteers were so willing to speak. I posed this question to my friends and colleagues and one response has stuck with me. People want to speak, people want to be heard and people want their experiences legitimized. The interviews fulfilled one predetermined objective—providing information for the project and two unanticipated outcomes—honouring the volunteers by allowing them to tell their stories and honouring me by letting me listen.
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