**Interviewing**

Adapted from Robert Weiss, *Learning from Strangers* (Simon & Schuster, 1994); and from Freeden’s experiences (of making lots of mistakes).

An interview is a specific kind of partnership: you’re helping someone to tell a story. Given that all interviews are personal, interviews are essentially about honoring the dignity of people. *During the interview, what the person says means more than anything else at that moment.*

Setting up the Interview

* Imagine that you’re helping your respondents to tell a story. Stories have beginnings and endings; and involve a sequence of events, tensions and resolutions, and climaxes. Rather than asking, say, an elementary school teacher how they feel about a school policy, ask something like, “Take me back to when you first learned about this policy. What was going through your mind?” You’ve helped someone to dust off a concrete memory in their head. Trust that they’ll create the connections from there.
* Check to see that your audio or recorder is working.
* Quiet rooms are best. Coffee shops are terrible.
* Have paper and pen. You’ll likely need to take notes, and taking notes also signals to respondents that you’re listening.

Conducting the Interview

* Right from the start, be calm, clear, and enthusiastic. Open with a brief description of your project. Ask your respondents if they have any questions. To make them feel comfortable, ask them how their days are going. Ask them for basic biographical information (hometown, where they live, etc.)
* Keep track of time. People who talk a lot lose track of time.
* Ask one question at a time. Avoid “double-barreled” questions and rephrasing questions multiple ways.
* Avoid leading questions, which are biased and encourages a certain answer. These signal to respondents that your assumptions matter more than what they think. So, “Describe the support you’ve received as a first-generation student on campus” is preferable to “Wouldn’t you say the university has done a poor job of supporting you as a first-generation college student?”
* Feelings matter, but start by asking respondents to describe concrete actions. “Walk me through your first day as a member of the club” will trigger feelings and events in people’s minds. Listen carefully and ask them to explain these feelings and events.
* With that said, feelings can be tricky. You’ll likely find that people will bring up how they felt about something on their own. That’s how emotions work! So approach feelings in a simple way. Normally a question like “how’d that make you feel?” is all you need.
* Imagine yourself as a guide who helps to point a respondent in certain directions. Ask simple questions such as, “What happened next?” “Where’d you go from there?” “What led to that?” “Who else was there with you?” “Could you explain that for me?”
* Listen for *markers:* critical bits of information that respondents bring up on their own. You may be asking about how a student feels about their History class when they mention that they haven’t been able to study because they’re stressed out about the election (a marker). Make a note of this and follow up later with a question about why they’re stressed out about the election.
* Be on the lookout for *nonverbal cues.* If you notice your respondent shrugging, grimacing, rolling their eyes, or whatever else, ask them to about it.
* Interviews are about one person, but they’re not entirely one way conversations. Don’t be stiff and pretend you’re not there. Laugh. Make eye contact. Check in after a while to see how they’re doing. Assure them they’re doing great.
* Try not to interrupt. Even if you can’t quite follow what they have to say, jot down why you might be confused and follow up when your respondent has finished talking.
* People often have strong opinions about how something can be improved. Towards the end of an interview, ask them what can be done to improve whatever you’re talking about, challenges to improvement, etc.
* End by asking if there are any final comments they want to make.