

learning landscape project

Research Methods: Coffee Meeting Interviews

About the Coffee Meeting Interviews

Between October 2006 and February 2008, the Learning Landscape Project conducted a series of 21 'Coffee Meeting Interviews' with 30 staff and 2 students. The purpose of the Coffee Meetings was to conduct a series of informal interviews, based around a standard set of questions. The choice of interview format was designed to engage participants, to explore issues of particular interest or concern to them, and to facilitate the cross-comparison of information about teaching and learning.

Coffee Meeting Interviews formed an integral part of the project's data gathering process. They were central to the writing of Case Records, which collated key information about teaching and learning practices and processes within individual Faculties and Departments, for sharing within the Project Steering Group.

Rationale and Research Warrant

Across the academic social sciences, as well as in fields such as policy development, program evaluation, and market research, interviews remain a key method for collecting qualitative data (Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Kvale 1996). Despite the growth over the past ten years in digital and computer-mediated research methods, "face-to-face" interviews are widely considered to provide to provide a productive way to engage with research participants and obtain in-depth qualitative data about their experiences, perceptions, and values. Semi-structured interviews, as used here, follow a pre-defined question set, but still allow for a degree of flexibility, using a mix of "open" and "closed" question types. While interviews are a resource-and time-intensive method, the benefits they provide are widely considered to outweigh their disadvantages (Patton 1990). The lack of generalisability of interview data is not considered problematic for highly contextualized research. Use of a semi-structured approach helps interviewers to retain a degree of flexibility (for example, in tailoring questions to participants' interests and experiences), while improving comparability across a series of interviews.

Interview Process and Schedule

Interviews involved one or two researchers leading a semi-structured interview process with between one and three participants. Participants were selected from among the membership of the Steering Group, or as representatives of key University and institutional bodies with special responsibility for teaching and learning (e.g. Chairs of Departmental/Faculty Teaching and Learning Committees). The emphasis in carrying out the process was on establishing informality and dialogue; hence the choice of name, "coffee meeting interviews", which fostered a sense of collegiality between interviewers and participants. Meetings were mostly held in participants' own institutions, which had the dual purpose of helping participants to relax and ensuring an appropriate level of privacy for discussions, as well as helping researchers to capture the diverse settings in which learning and teaching takes place at Cambridge.

Interview Protocol

- Where more than one interviewer was present, each interviewer took notes during the meeting.
- Researchers individually typed up interview notes and added them to the project team's secure site on CamTools, as a record of the meeting (CamTools is the Virtual Learning and Research Environment, or VRLE, for the University of Cambridge).

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- Researchers might also request permission from interviewees to tape record the interview, and permission to share the resulting recording with members of the project team and steering group.
- Interview notes (and a/v recordings, if taken) then became source documents for Faculty/Departmental Case Records compiled by researchers.

Question Schedule

In your Faculty/Department/College:

1. Where does teaching take place?
2. How is students' time organized?
3. What happens in a typical lecture?
4. Would you say that lectures are different now from those 10 years ago?
5. What happens in a typical supervision?
6. This question is specific to teaching practices in the interview participants' discipline, and is based on prior desk research by interviewers (e.g. What happens in practicals? What is 'coursework'?).
7. Could you tell me about the breakdown of assessment? (Sub questions: who decides on this?; How is assessment related to teaching?).
8. What are the main issues in teaching and learning in your Faculty/Department?
9. Tell us about any innovations in teaching and learning in your institution of which you are aware.
10. Can you describe the nature of your research and how it relates to your teaching?
11. What is the most appropriate way to engage staff in your institution with the Learning Landscape Project? What is the most logical next step?

Benefits of the Coffee Meeting Interviews

The Coffee Meeting Interviews proved especially useful for the purposes of consultation and stakeholder engagement, helping to explain and publicise the project within institutions. Interviews helped the project team to identify changes and innovations in teaching and learning, as well as to document current practice. Finally, the Coffee Meeting Interviews provided a way to obtain information about internal organizational dynamics and culture, whose impact on teaching and learning may be considerable, but may not be accessible solely from published information sources or official documentation on teaching and learning.

About the Learning Landscape Project

The Learning Landscape Project (2006—2008) is a research project that was initiated to create a descriptive framework of learning and teaching at the University of Cambridge.

For further information, please visit the project website:

<http://www.caret.cam.ac.uk/learninglandscape/>

References and Further Reading

Denzin, N. K., and Lincoln, Y. S. (eds) (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kvale, S. (1996). *Inter Views: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.