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The Practical Utility and Suitability of Email Interviews in Qualitative Research

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Abstract

Interviews with key informants are the most common means of data collection in qualitative descriptive research. Researchers have historically preferred face-to-face interviews but advances in technology have resulted in more options, including email exchanges, to conduct interviews. This article examines the practical utility and suitability of the email interview in qualitative research. The author will share personal experiences from a recent qualitative study involving email interviews of nurse educators. The purpose of the study was to describe the experiences of nurse educators in developing and implementing concurrent enrollment ADN-BSN programs. Interviews of nurse educators describing their experiences of developing and implementing concurrent enrollment ADN-BSN programs offered a firsthand account of the process. A discussion of the potential advantages, disadvantages, and relative appropriateness of email interviews will assist qualitative researchers in determining when this method of data collection may be preferred for their own research.

Keywords

Email Interviews, Electronic Interviews, Interview Methods, Online Interviews

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Interviews with key informants are the most common means of data collection in qualitative descriptive research. Researchers have historically preferred face-to-face interviews but advances in technology have resulted in more options, including email exchanges, to conduct interviews. This article examines the practical utility and suitability of the email interview in qualitative research. The author will share personal experiences from a recent qualitative study involving email interviews of nurse educators. The purpose of the study was to describe the experiences of nurse educators in developing and implementing concurrent enrollment ADN-BSN programs. Interviews of nurse educators describing their experiences of developing and implementing concurrent enrollment ADN-BSN programs offered a firsthand account of the process. A discussion of the potential advantages, disadvantages, and relative appropriateness of email interviews will assist qualitative researchers in determining when this method of data collection may be preferred for their own research. Keywords: Email Interviews, Electronic Interviews, Interview Methods, Online Interviews

Semi-structured or structured interviews of representative participants are the most common method of data collection in qualitative research (Sandelowski, 2000). Researchers have primarily conducted face-to-face interviews (Polit & Beck, 2014); but with advances in technology, multiple options such as telephone, videoconference, email, and text message interview methods for data collection now exist (Oltmann, 2016; Redlich-Amirav & Higginbottom, 2014). This article focuses on the email interview. Email exchanges are emerging as an alternative method for conducting interviews in qualitative research (Gibson, 2010; Walker, 2013) but researchers need more information on the advantages, disadvantages, and relative appropriateness of this method.

Deciding on the best interview technique for each study should be based on an assessment of several factors. The research aims, confidence of credible findings, potential advantages and disadvantages of the data collection method such as time required to conduct interviews, costs and accessibility, researcher familiarity with the technology, and relative comfort level of the subject population with the technology are important factors when considering the email interview for conducting research. The purpose of this article is to discuss the practical utility and suitability of email interviews in qualitative research in consideration of these factors. Lessons learned from the author's personal experiences from a recent qualitative study involving email interviews of nurse educators will assist researchers in determining when to consider email interviews in their research.

Background

In a recent qualitative study, I conducted semi-structured email interviews of 17 nurse educators from 11 different nursing programs across the country. The purpose of the study was to describe the experiences of nurse educators in developing and implementing concurrent enrollment ADN-BSN programs. Concurrent enrollment ADN-BSN programs are educational

partnerships combining simultaneous enrollment in ADN and BSN nursing coursework at two separate institutions. Participants were nurse educators recruited via email from schools of nursing offering concurrent enrollment ADN-BSN programs in the United States.

A qualitative descriptive design as described by Sandelowski (2000) was utilized for the study because it was well suited for describing experiences from a phenomenological perspective within real-life context (Munhall, 2012). Unlike research studies that utilize traditional phenomenological methodology to interpret and understand the meaning of phenomena or to capture the essence or lived experience of phenomena (Munhall, 2012), the aim of this study was to describe an experience as told by the participants with minimal interpretation from the researcher (Sandelowski, 2000).

Data collection for qualitative descriptive studies such as this one is typically through extensive interviews with a small number of primary participants (Sandelowski, 2000; Seidman, 2006). I utilized email to conduct semi-structured interviews. Via email correspondence, participants responded to the same initial open-ended interview questions related to the experiences of concurrent enrollment ADN-BSN programs (see Appendix A). Subsequent interview questions were based on the initial responses and included additional probing questions to elicit further details and encourage reflection of emerging themes. The interviews of nurse educators describing their experiences of developing and implementing concurrent enrollment ADN-BSN programs offered a firsthand account of the process.

The qualitative descriptive design for this study using a phenomenological perspective included thematic analysis of the interview data and resulted in a narrative descriptive composite of the experience (Flick, 2007). Findings from the study provide nurse educators with information to assist in the decision-making process of whether or not to implement the educational model in other institutions.

Potential Advantages

Qualitative researchers increasingly use technology to collect research data more efficiently and economically (Walker, 2013). Researchers face substantial travel costs and time commitments to conduct in person interviews with study participants located in different geographical areas. Often the expense of time and money are too substantial and render the study infeasible. A major advantage of the email interview is that it offers a convenient and practical alternative to overcome geographical barriers and financial concerns that hinder face-to-face interviews (Walker, 2013). Qualitative researchers using email interviews for data collection found that scheduling advantages of the email interview increases access to participants and encourages greater participation of working adults (Fritz & Vandermause, 2017). Email interviews can be conducted with participants all over the world without the additional expenses of travel costs and travel time. Although telephone and video interviews offer this same advantage, a distinct feature of the email interview is the ability to conduct asynchronous interviews.

Unlike interviews in real time, participants can respond to email interview prompts at their own convenience at a time that is suitable solely to them (Gibson, 2014). Beyond simple convenience, the unique asynchronous nature of email interviews allows the participant more control over their level of participation. More control of their own level of participation offers an ethical advantage over traditional synchronous interviews as the participant controls the amount of time spent in the interview (Mason & Ide, 2014). In prior research, participants report appreciation for the convenience of email interviews (Fritz & Vandermause, 2017) and derive pleasure from "authoring their life experiences" (Gibson, 2010, p. 7).

Email interview exchanges are not limited to the time constraints of a scheduled interview and allow for prolonged engagement with participants to connect and establish

relationships. The back-and-forth email conversations may extend over a period of weeks or months allowing the researcher to clarify descriptive data, pursue further discovery, and ensure accuracy in describing the phenomenon from the perspective of the participants. Participants have time to reflect on their answers before crafting written responses. The iterative exchange and opportunity for reflective, well-formed responses results in more thoughtful, relevant data (Fritz & Vandermause, 2017; Gibson, 2010; Seidman, 2006)

Technologically savvy participants may prefer electronic data collection methods. Adolescents routinely interact through technology and prefer text-based communication to face-to-face communication (Mason & Ide, 2014). Because adolescents are more comfortable with electronic communication, conducting email interviews enables the researcher to establish greater rapport with participants. Adapting research methodologies that align with their usual and preferred environment results in a more natural and candid exchange (Mason & Ide, 2014). In contrast to thoughtful, reflective responses as described above, the natural exchange contributes to the free flow of ideas traditionally associated with real time interviews (Glassmeyer & Dibbs, 2012; Sedgwick & Spiers, 2009). The perceived anonymity and decreased power differential attributed to email interviews increases the richness of the data collection as participants more willingly share intimate details of their experiences (Bampton & Cowton, 2002; Gibson, 2014; Mason & Ide, 2014). Participants may also be more comfortable discontinuing the study without the physical presence of the researcher, another ethical advantage (Gibson, 2014; Mason & Ide, 2014).

Email interviews save both time and money in transcription costs. The written responses are easily converted to transcribed data resulting in significant savings over the typical expenditures for transcribing an oral interview (Gibson, 2010). In many cases, transcription costs are the biggest expense in qualitative research studies (Turner, 2016). Researchers conducting multiple interviews with multiple participants should anticipate substantial budget expenditures for transcription costs. Turner (2016) estimates the expense for transcribing a one-hour interview at approximately sixty dollars. In my experience, transcription costs are around one hundred dollars to convert each hour of audio data to text. Using this range, twenty hours of recorded oral interview data could cost up to two thousand dollars in transcription services. For cost savings as well as immersion in the data, many researchers elect to transcribe their own data. From a quick Google search and review of qualitative research forums, the time estimate to convert an oral recording to typed text ranges anywhere from 3-9 hours per each hour of recorded data. The researcher would spend 60-180 hours transcribing twenty hours of recorded oral interview data. In comparison, the typed responses of email interviews can be directly cut and pasted to transcribed data and immediately ready for coding and analysis (Fritz & Vandermause, 2017). Converting the typed responses of participants directly into transcripts minimizes typographical errors and misheard or misunderstood interpretations that are common during transcription from oral recordings (Turner, 2016).

Potential Disadvantages

Using email for data collection also has some challenges and potential disadvantages. A disadvantage of email interviews for participants is that crafting the written responses is by nature more time consuming than oral interviews (Fritz & Vandermause, 2017; Gibson, 2014). Consequently, another disadvantage of the email interview is the potential for short, concise answers and possible attrition as participants may discontinue the exchange. Time limitations could inhibit data collection or discourage participation all together. It should be noted that although written interviews are usually more time consuming for participants than

oral interviews, the potential disadvantages of succinct responses, attrition, and limited participation due to time constraints are not restricted to email interviews.

Some researchers argue that the written responses of email interviews lack some of the social cues that contribute to a full understanding of the participant's experience. There is no opportunity to observe and interpret visual cues, tone, hesitation, or silence (Fritz & Vandermause, 2017). This concern is somewhat mitigated as qualitative researchers using email interview techniques have noted that participants employ other written cues, such as bold print, capitalization, punctuation, emoticons, and abbreviations like LOL (laugh out loud) to communicate timing, tone, inflection, and mood (Gibson, 2010). However, even with the added written cues, researchers cannot respond in real-time or capture current conversation interests and emotions (Fritz & Vandermause, 2017).

The lack of email access or discomfort with email communication may limit participation in the study. Limiting participation to those who have email access and are comfortable with written email communication could result in a sample bias of younger, more technologically savvy, higher educated or higher income participants (Fritz & Vandermause, 2017).

Finally, data collection methods that rely on technology are subject to the limitations of technology such as computer malfunctions. Internet connectivity may be interrupted or slow. Cyber security breaches may result in a loss of confidentiality (Fritz & Vandermause, 2017). Researchers who have used email interviews for data collection recommend a separate, password protected email account with a strong password of at least eight characters and a combination of numbers and uppercase, lowercase letter to maintain privacy and confidentiality (Gibson, 2014). With the potential for cyber security breaches, both the researcher and the interviewee should take deliberate measures to mitigate the risk. Consideration for the impact of a confidentiality breach is one factor in determining the suitability of the email interview. The risks of negative outcomes resulting from loss of confidentiality are decreased in research studies of benign, non-sensitive subject matters. Creating fake accounts for anonymity is a common practice in online forums (Gibson, 2010). Adapting this practice in email interviews, such as creating an email pseudonym, is one method to better protect the confidentiality of participants (Opdenakker, 2006).

Personal Experiences

Email interviews proved to be a very effective method of data collection for my study purposes of describing the process of developing and implementing concurrent enrollment ADN-BSN programs. To better understand participant experiences, I conducted semi-structured email interviews of nurse educators involved in concurrent enrollment programs across the country. Electronic technology was necessary due to geographical barriers that hindered face-to-face interviews. Because concurrent enrollment programs typically involve online components, nurse educators routinely communicate via email and are comfortable in the online environment. Because previous researchers found university faculty to be interactive and quick responders in research conducted via email (Mann & Stewart, 2000), I was optimistic that my targeted population would respond similarly. I also recognized that email interviews would be convenient to overcome scheduling challenges with busy faculty.

Consideration of participant characteristics is essential in determining if email interviews are appropriate for the intended study. Traits and characteristics that are common to the targeted population for my study minimized some of the vulnerabilities of email interviewing for data collection. As previously discussed, nurse educators typically have computer access and consistent Internet connectivity and routinely communicate via email. Most, if not all, of the participants in my study were involved with online learning programs

and were comfortable with email communication. Convenience as well as the familiarity and comfort with the email communication used for both recruitment and data collection in my study may have encouraged greater participation and better engagement.

For example, participants in my study responded sooner than expected with detailed and lengthy answers to open-ended questions. Individual interviews occurred over a two- to four-week period of iterative email exchanges. Remarkably, there was no attrition. All 17 participants continued to respond until follow up questions were no longer initiated. Many participants responded to follow up questions within 24 hours. The asynchronous nature of the interview meant that participants were not limited to the time constraints of a scheduled interview. However, given the time demands of constructing written responses, their answers to the research prompts were surprisingly lengthy and in depth. Some transcripts exceeded eleven single-spaced pages of data. A few participants attached supporting documents and website links to further explain their responses. Overall, the participants in my study were extremely responsive and seemed enthusiastic to share their experiences.

One of the advantages that researchers attribute to email interviews is clear, concise participant responses that are more relevant to the research question. Written responses of email interviews are typically shorter and more consistently connected to the research topic than oral responses, resulting in shorter, cleaner transcripts (Bowden & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015; Fritz & Vandermause, 2017). In spite of the surprisingly lengthy responses from my participants, this held true in my experience. Transcripts for my study were between six to twelve single-spaced pages. In contrast, transcribed data from a 90-minute oral interview results in up to 30 pages of single-spaced text (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pedersen, 2013), much of which may be described as "noise" and often not directly relevant to the research question (Bowden & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015; Fritz & Vandermause, 2017). The specific research questions and aims of each individual study will impact the length of the responses and help determine whether or not "noise" is relevant data.

The aim of my study was to describe a process. The method of inquiry was a generic qualitative descriptive study. Because my study was not designed to capture a lived experience or the essence of a phenomenon, written descriptive responses related to the process adequately and thoroughly answered the research question. As recommended by Seidman (2006), the first interview question for my investigation sought information related to the role of the participant in relationship to the phenomena of interest, or in this case, their role in developing and implementing concurrent enrollment ADN-BSN programs (see Appendix A). Understanding the role of the participant in developing and implementing concurrent enrollment programs provided context and assisted in establishing rapport. One recommendation for establishing rapport in online interviews is to "demonstrate a shared identity with the participants" (Bowden & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015, p. 85). As a nurse educator directly involved with concurrent enrollment ADN-BSN programs, I disclosed this as part of my self-introduction in my recruitment email to prospective participants. Throughout the correspondence, I connected with participants by demonstrating an understanding of the language and culture associated with concurrent enrollment ADN-BSN programs.

After establishing the role of the participant, the initial interview continued with semi structured open ended questions related to the overall impression, including pros and cons, of developing and implementing concurrent enrollment programs (see Appendix A). Follow-up questions were then formulated in response to the participants answers to the initial questions to gain a better understanding of the specific processes of developing and implementing concurrent enrollment ADN-BSN programs. The interview continued in an asynchronous iterative email exchange to construct details of their experiences. One advantage that I noted with the email interview method was that I had prolonged engagement with my participants. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend prolonged engagement to promote credible findings in

qualitative research. Rather than a single meeting with participants that is common with scheduled face-to-face interviews, the asynchronous nature of the email interview conveniently allows for extended access with participants (Opdenakker, 2006). The extended access to the participant proved to be beneficial for follow-up questioning and clarification. Seidman (2006) recommends sequential interviewing to allow more time for participants to construct details and reflect on the phenomena. The interviews with my participants extended for up to four weeks with multiple email exchanges. The extended access provided an opportunity for reflection for both the researcher and participants. Participants were able to carefully craft responses and revise and edit before sending. The iterative email communication facilitated a convenient forum for further questioning to clarify ideas and ensure accuracy of the description of the phenomenon of interest. The ability to ensure accuracy of the account with participants is a method of member checking and increases trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Because email interviews were asynchronous, I was able to concurrently conduct interviews with more than one participant. As a result, I found that I was also able to verify emerging themes between participants as more than one interview was simultaneously in progress. Verifying emerging themes increases dependibility and confirmability of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The quick and easy conversion of written email responses into transcripts facilitated simultaneous interviewing, coding and analysis. As new participants and responses were added in my investigation, transcripts were continually read and re-read for comparison with previous data. Through comparison of data for similar concepts, themes emerged early in the data coding process. As patterns emerged during initial interviews, themes were further explored in subsequent interviews with future participants and cross-compared to existing data for pattern matching. Recurring and matching patterns found during data analysis determined the themes and subthemes related to the process.

Continual reflection on emerging themes in the data, as recommended by Saldaña (2013), assisted in developing relevant follow up questions that verified themes and increased confidence of credible findings. For example, an early theme related to the process of developing and implementing concurrent enrollment programs emerged as obtaining buy-in from "skeptical" faculty and "chronic nay-sayers" who "resisted the notion—probably just because it had not been done that way." Follow up questions provided more details to the steps involved in obtaining buy-in. Participants described strategies to "win approval" of skeptical faculty by providing a "great deal of reassurance" and "educating them about how the program works and the benefits to the students may help [to gain support]." When asked to identify some of the benefits, participants universally endorsed concurrent enrollment programs as a "faster" and more "cost effective" model for "seamless progression" to the BSN. They highlighted additional benefits, such as "more job opportunities" for both students completing a BSN and faculty teaching the courses as well as the benefits to "healthcare institutions and the profession by producing a more highly educated nurse early in the career." Converging viewpoints and common experiences from participants from multiple sites and multiple perspectives increased the credibility and depth of the study findings.

One challenge that I faced with the email interview was defining closure. Because there was no preset number of iterative email exchanges in the consent, there was no specified limit on the number of follow up questions and emails that I could send. I was concerned that my participants would grow weary of follow up emails as well as the anticipation of even more follow up emails. Adding to this challenge, participants were offered an honorarium Amazon gift card of $50 to compensate them for their time. I quickly realized that participants might perceive that I was holding the gift card hostage until all follow up questions were satisfied. To overcome this challenge, I established a practice of sending a thank you note with the online Amazon gift card after each participant's second response. Although many participants

continued responding to my follow up questions, I felt that the thank you note and gift card communicated that participants were not obliged to continue to respond beyond their own level of desired engagement. For future studies, I will establish a defined time period or specified limit of email exchanges as part of the informed consent. In a survey of email interview research participants, Bowden and Galindo-Gonzalez (2015) found that participants were more likely to participate in a study with established time or email exchange limits. In addition to increased participation, establishing the maximum number of email exchanges facilitates closure of the interview and contributes to more ethical practices. Participants will have a better understanding of the time commitment required for the interview before consenting to participate as well as "eligibility" for compensation offered for their time. With pre-defined limits, researchers will be less likely to pressure participants to continue in the study beyond their desired level of participation. For example, one challenge that I experienced with the email interview was that a few of my participants forgot to respond or "lost" my emails. I was fortunate that all participants responded to a single reminder prompt, but this challenge helped me realize that specifying limits on the number of reminder prompts allowed should also be a part of the informed consent for email interviews.

When considering electronic data collection for qualitative studies, researchers should examine multiple factors. Important factors that help determine the appropriateness of email interviews include the research aims and potential advantages and disadvantages of this method in promoting feasibility and credibility of the study.

A number of the advantages associated with email interviews contributed to credible findings and promoted feasibility of the study highlighted in this article. The email interview proved to be a very effective data collection method for the specific research aim and targeted participants. Research studies designed to describe an experience rather than to interpret or understand a phenomenon may be well suited for electronic data collection methods. The targeted participants almost universally have access to email and are very comfortable with email communication, another important factor when considering email for data collection. Furthermore, nurse educators are very busy and are more likely to participant in research studies that are convenient. I believe the high level of participation in this study with no attrition of participants is directly attributed to the convenience and comfort of email communication used for data collection. As a result, the email interview was advantageous for this particular study and may have elicited a fuller experience than traditional face-to-face interviews. The personal experiences add unique findings associated with this study and validate prior research in a new context that should assist qualitative researchers in determining when this method of data collection may be preferred for their own research.

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Appendix

Appendix A. Semi-Structured Topic Guide

Initial Interview Questions:

1. Describe your role in developing and implementing concurrent enrollment ADN-BSN programs.
2. Describe your overall impression of developing and implementing concurrent enrollment ADN-BSN programs?
3. What do you consider some of the pros and cons of concurrent enrollment ADN-BSN programs for students, faculty, institutions and the nursing profession?

Subsequent interview questions will be based on the initial responses and will include additional probing questions to further explore and reflect on the experience of developing and implementing concurrent enrollment ADN-BSN programs.

Developed using Seidman (2006) interview recommendations.

Author Note

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