

# Epistolary Interviews On-line: A Novel Addition to the Researcher's Palette

Margaret Debenham PhD February 2007

## Introduction

This paper reports on the experimental introduction of a novel research method (termed epistolary interviews) to conduct personal interviews at a distance via asynchronous e-mail. The work was undertaken at The Open University UK between January and April 1999 as part of the final phase of a linear series of doctoral research studies designed to explore the experience of undergraduate distance learners with long-term health problems (Debenham 2001). Two earlier experimental studies used Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) to provide a group of undergraduate distance learners with access to the services of an educational counsellor/advisor, both 'one to one' by e-mail and within the group environment in a closed computer conference. An overview of the process and findings of these studies is available in the article [Computer-Mediated Communication and Disability Support: Addressing Barriers to Study \(Margaret Debenham\)](#).

- Based on the experience of this work, a number of reasons emerged to suggest that e-mail might be a potentially useful method for conducting in-depth personal interviews. Firstly, communication via this route could provide an immediate text based record of the interview. This promised a positive advantage in research terms compared with the tedious business of accurately transcribing audio recordings of face-to-face interviews.
- Secondly, using e-mail offered interesting possibilities as a means of interviewing participants who had long-term health problems with conditions that were liable to fluctuate from day to day (for example - but by no means exclusively - Multiple Sclerosis [MS], Myalgic Encephalopathy [ME], Arthritis, Diabetes, Epilepsy). In such circumstances there was no guarantee that participants would be fit enough to be interviewed face-to-face at a pre-arranged time. Additionally evidence from an earlier study (Debenham 2001, Chapter 4) suggested that travelling distances could often pose problems for such students for a variety of reasons. These may include mobility problems, inaccessibility of public transport, severe fatigue, pain and non-availability of a carer to accompany them (again not an exclusive list). What may seem simple everyday tasks, accomplished without conscious thought by non-disabled people, can pose barriers of major proportions for those with disabling conditions. Conducting interviews face-to-face with volunteers who lived at considerable distances from the researcher could therefore require arranging to visit them at home.
- Thirdly, it was premised that using this method would permit participants to read, digest and reflect on the questions posed and prepare their responses at leisure, when they were feeling freshest, severe fatigue having been identified as being a major problem by the first study of the series

(Debenham 2001, Chapter 4).

The alternative of using telephone interviews was considered but rejected as not so suitable in these circumstances for a number of reasons, as set out below.

- Use of a normal telephone handset can be difficult for anyone who is hearing impaired, depending on the degree of hearing loss.
- Some medical conditions can cause speech to sound distorted to the listener (for example MS).

- Those with speech difficulties for any reason (e.g. Cerebral Palsy, Stroke) can sometimes find it difficult to make themselves understood.
- Pain or muscle weakness can make it problematic to hold a telephone up to the ear for more than a few minutes at a time. Examples of conditions that may impose this restriction include Arthritis, MS, Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE) and ME, amongst many others.

Another alternative, communication by synchronous on-line messaging in real time, was also rejected as unsuitable in this instance. More than half of those surveyed in the first study of the series (N = 281) reported difficulties with manual dexterity (Debenham 2001, Chapter 4). This suggested that some participants might have problems typing quickly enough to maintain 'quick fire' conversations on-line. Denise Lance (2001), an on-line teacher with Cerebral Palsy, provides a useful illustration of the sort of problems that can arise in this respect. She highlights the way in which the use of CMC greatly facilitates her communication with her students, permitting her to prepare complete messages off-line before posting them as an entity.

In summary, using epistolary interviews on-line made it possible to consider including participants living at long distances from the author's own location. It promised a number of research advantages, as set out below:

- It would be time saving in terms of eliminating the need to travel; it would be cost saving, since neither travel expenses nor accommodation bills would be incurred; It would enable both interviewees and interviewer to make considered responses in their own time and at their own speed.
- In the particular case of disabled researchers (including this author) all the above points constitute valuable enabling factors in facilitating this type of work.

## Design and Process of the Study

Five in-depth epistolary interviews were undertaken via e-mail during the period January to April 1999. They formed one part of a set of eleven in-depth personal interviews. The other six interviews were conducted face-to-face and are not discussed in detail here. The design for the whole set of interviews was based on a semi-structured conversational format similar to that described by Wilson (1996) and adapted for text-based communication in the case of the epistolary interviews. Reflection suggested that a framework of open-ended key questions would be most appropriate for the purpose, together with guidelines for follow-up prompts, depending on response. An important aim was to build rapport between interviewer and interviewee to encourage participants to communicate freely. This concept was influenced by the work of Ormond Simpson, who perceptively identifies a range of skills useful in postal communication between an academic advisor and individual students (Simpson 1988). His list includes the following recommendations to facilitate good communication:

- Adopting a relaxed, friendly style of response and being non-judgmental;
- Being perceptive and open-ended in responses;
- Encouraging the students to think through the issues for themselves.

This approach displays the influence of the work of Carl Rogers, which emphasises the need for a sensitive and empathic understanding of a student's reactions. This, he argues, facilitates personal growth in the student (Rogers and Allender 1983).

Another influence was Zimmer's concept of an 'Empathy Template'. This provides a creative template, originally designed to foster harmonious communication in a course-based computer conferencing environment (Zimmer 1995; Zimmer and Alexander 1996). It involves the conscious use of particular phrasing to reinforce positive understanding and acceptance of another person's position without recourse to acrimony when differences of opinion occur.

The composition of the sample of students who participated in this set of personal interviews is described below.

## Face-to-face interviews

- Two students from the main study (Debenham 2001, Chapter 6). These students had experienced access to a peer group computer conference and the services of an educational advisor, both one to one by e-mail and in a closed group environment.
- Two students using computers on a stand-alone basis (that is with no network connectivity).
- Two students who had not up to then used a computer at all.

## Epistolary interviews

- Two students from the main study (Debenham 2001, Chapter 6). These students had experienced access to a peer group computer conference and the services of educational advisor both one to one by e-mail and in a closed group environment.
- Three students who were users of the 'Virtual Campus', but without access to the facilities described above.

The implementation of the latter sub-set of interviews is described in the following section.

## The Epistolary Interviews On-line

All five of the e-mail interviewees were Open University undergraduates who were partway through their studies toward a first degree. All were volunteers who had had access to that institution's 'Virtual Campus' (a dedicated password-protected computer conferencing environment using the FirstClass™ conferencing platform) for at least a year. They were therefore familiar with use of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) before the interviews commenced. All were living with disabling long-term health conditions. These included ME, SLE and Paraplegia. Two were already known to the researcher having been participants in an earlier main study; three were not. All were guaranteed anonymity in any published data.

Six starter questions (with follow up prompts) were prepared in advance for the two participants from the main study, and seven in the case of the three new participants. If any unexpected issue emerged during the 'conversation' this was also followed up. The next starter question was not necessarily introduced until a few messages later if an interesting discussion had developed.

Some communication techniques developed during the epistolary interviews include the following:

- Making a précis of the student's response to initial open-ended questions and feeding this back to him/her to confirm the researcher's understanding of what had been said. Examples are given below:

**1. Margaret to Jeremy:** Thank you Jeremy for your thoughtful and interesting reply. No it isn't too long, just what I'm looking for. <Smile> so, to summarise my understanding of what you are saying so far, a relationship of personal rapport with your counsellor is important to you? And also continuity is important because of the demands it makes on energy levels to have to re-state your situation? Would that be right?

**Jeremy replies:** Yes, absolutely, I feel that (some, not all) disabled people require that personal contact with the OU. It enables a sense of security and confidence to build up whilst you gain your feet again

**2. Margaret to Gareth:** Looking through your last para (sic) -

"The main difference is that I have become more interested in people. As a result my study focus is less narrow. [... snip ...] I can get up in the morning, switch on my computer, and 'Take a Shortcut to the Open University!'"

- My reading is that it has been a broadening educational experience for you to have access to the range of facilities and other students on the 'Virtual Campus'. Have I understood that correctly?

**Gareth replies:** Yes, that's right. Also, contact with other students has stimulated me to broaden my educational experience in other ways. E.g. I've started watching OU Humanities TV programmes.

- Making positive affirmations that the interviewee's responses were of interest and valued; use of the interviewee's name at intervals during the course of the conversational exchange of messages.

**1. Margaret to Gareth:** That is really very interesting indeed. Thank you Gareth for taking the time and trouble to search out that example and your thoughtful analysis of it. It prompts me to ask, did this contact in the group affect your use of one to one e-mail contact with the counsellor in any way?

**2. Margaret to Jennifer:** I'm interested that you say that the only way for you to contact your Tutor Counsellor was by fax Jennifer. Does this mean that you had difficulty in contacting her by phone? Can you tell me a bit more about this?

More extended examples of extracts from the interviews may be found in Debenham (2001) Chapter 7.

## Evaluation of the Data

The evaluation of the data took place in the context of the study as a whole, including both face-to-face and epistolary interviews. The first task was to transcribe the face-to-face interviews into a written dialogue, a long and tedious process (including coding to show pauses, laughs etc). In the case of the epistolary interviews the reverse situation applied. Although each of these took about two weeks to complete in the first instance, editing the pre-existing text into dialogue format proved to be a relatively easy task. For example, using the 'find and replace' function in Word™ made it easy to substitute pseudonyms for the real names of the interviewees and other people or places mentioned in the interviews that might have identified the participants.

Colour coding was used to highlight key issues within each interview. These were then extracted and grouped into sets of similar issues, using a tabular format. This collated data enabled a comparison to be made with the findings of the earlier studies.

## Procedural issues

The participants taking part in the epistolary interviews were already familiar with the use of e-mail and it was gratifying that few problems with communication via this route occurred. None of the participants dropped out. All completed the full interview, even though this involved a considerable time commitment over an extended period. However, a few procedural points emerged that are worthy of note.

It had been the initial intention to undertake several interviews at the same time. However, it quickly became apparent that trying to juggle more than two at once would make it difficult to maintain the necessary mental focus on each interviewee. A decision was therefore made to limit the number to not more than two at any one time. This worked well.

On two occasions a participant took a few days to reply, and in each case a carefully composed message was sent as a reminder. In one instance the student had not been well; in the other the individual concerned had been tied up with personal matters. Both had good reasons for the delay - and both happily went on to complete the interviews.

As the interviews progressed it transpired that several different strands of the conversation sometimes developed within each message, using the useful 'reply with quote' facility available in the FirstClass™ software. This had the effect that several repetitions of the same text could occur within the sequential train of messages. These needed to be edited out at the data evaluation stage when consolidating the whole run of messages.

## Conclusions

In practice, asynchronous e-mail fulfilled its promise as an interview medium. It proved to be particularly well suited to the circumstances of this set of interviewees, resulting in the collection of high-quality data. It enabled participants to reply at a time suited to their own circumstances and permitted time for reflection. An enabling factor in this respect was that replies could be prepared off-line and sent as a coherent whole when completed, even if they had been typed slowly over a period of time. This was valuable for these interviewees, all of whom experienced difficulties with manual dexterity and/or severe fatigue as a result of their various conditions. It might also be advantageous for any visually impaired voice software users, though none of the students interviewed on this occasion were using this facility. Similarly, it permitted the researcher to take time over digesting interviewees' messages and considering what issues might usefully be probed with further questions.

The author experienced certain differences between face-to-face and e-mail interviews during this study. The former permitted more spontaneity – a particular advantage being that it was possible to observe facial expression and body language. However, this method did not allow time for reflection in the same way as proved possible with the e-mail interviews.

In summary, the findings suggest that epistolary interviews on-line may be considered suitable for in-depth interviews in the following cases:

- where participants live/work in locations that are at long distances from the researcher, whether within the same country or internationally;
- where participants have access to computers and an Internet Service Provider (ISP) and are already reasonably experienced users of e-mail;



- where participants (be they interviewees or researcher) have various disabilities and/or long-term health conditions, for the reasons discussed earlier.

In the context of research interviews generally this method provides a useful additional tool to the researcher's palette. However, it is not necessarily always the most appropriate option. For example, e-mail would probably not be the optimal choice when interviewing someone with a busy lifestyle and limited time available. A face-to-face interview that could be completed in a well-defined time slot would probably be more appropriate in those circumstances. It would also obviously be impractical to consider using this route in the case of anyone who may be without access to a computer for any reason – either temporarily or permanently.

In conclusion, the experimental project reported here contributes some modest benchmark data to the body of knowledge in the field of interview research methodology. More work is merited to explore the interesting new opportunities afforded by emerging technological developments. For example, in recent years the availability of Broadband communication has expanded rapidly and is now widespread. In consequence, high-quality voice and video applications using Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) have now become more generally viable. This increases the feasibility of conducting 'virtual' face-to-face interviews at a distance using video links between Personal Computers. Without doubt, the use of CMC offers exciting new possibilities to the research community.

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