

Never Eat Anything Raw: Fieldwork Lessons from the Pros

***Great interviewers
are made, not born.***



Interviewing is based on asking questions. As children we all learned to ask questions (perhaps more than the adults around us were ready for!), but it takes work to become a skilled interviewer—the kind of interviewer with whom a natural exchange is almost inevitable and for whom asking questions is as effortless as Roger Federer’s forehand. Great interviewers are made, not born.

While Steve has been working on a book about interviewing [1], we’ve had the ongoing opportunity to think even more about the experiences that have shaped us as interviewers. Of course, as researchers we are compelled to look outside ourselves, so we asked some people we admire to tell us about how they improve their interviewing skills. We have synthesized our findings into four key areas: practice, reflect, critique, and exchange.

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Cultivating a sense of mindfulness in daily interactions is a path for growth.

Practice

Do or do not. There is no try.

—Yoda

To get better, we must, as Yoda exhorts us, do. Just as the virtuoso musician spends hours playing scales in the practice room, so too can we practice core interviewing skills—such as framing questions, asking, listening, considering, and responding—outside the professional context.

Jon Kolko, founder of the Austin Center for Design (and a regular contributor to interactions) furthers his skills through his work as a teacher. “Teaching has been the best source of practice for design research. Both are extremely focused activities, within strange and artificial social settings, where the way someone feels deeply impacts the actions that they take. I often find myself critiquing a student’s work in order to provoke dialogue, empathize with their perspective, and extract more knowledge about the situation. While the mechanism for design

research is extremely different, the intent is the same: to provoke dialogue, gain empathy, and extract knowledge.” Others have told us their work experiences as bartenders or waiters provided them with similar insight into a somewhat contrived interpersonal interaction.

For some, cultivating a sense of mindfulness in daily interactions is a path for growth. As David St. John, a UX Architect at T-Mobile USA, says, “I try not to be a passer-by. I crossed a street in Seattle when a woman looked at me and said ‘Would you like to change the world in five minutes?’ It was a hook that left me wanting to learn more. After she explained why she was collecting signatures, I asked her a follow-up question about why she was there. She answered with a story that began: ‘I left home in Hawaii with 50 dollars in my pocket, because I knew there was more to life, and that I would figure it out.’” In that same way, casual encounters with taxi drivers, cashiers, and airplane seatmates

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are opportunities for practice. Note that David didn't set out to interview strangers at random, but when he was given permission, he took a very small step to ask an additional question. Sometimes that's all it takes.

Where does that mindfulness take you when it goes beyond a deliberate act and becomes intrinsic to your entire being? Ethnographer Julie Pegg, chief storyteller and president of Gaze Ethnographic Consulting, offers her perspective: "I don't practice interviewing techniques, because I have never defined what I do as interviewing. I've learned to just be myself, be natural, and have a comfortable two-way conversation. That approach works very well for me. It's what I do in my everyday life, and it's what I do in the field. I don't have anything special that I do to prepare for talking to people aside from being in the world, genuinely caring about people's stories, and then giving them the space to share those stories with me."

Reflect

Mistakes were made.

— Ron Ziegler, Richard Nixon's White House press secretary

Just like sports teams watching game tapes, observing your own successes and failures can prove quite instructive. Maish Nichani, managing director of PebbleRoad, records mock interviews conducted over Skype, building up a library of exemplars that he can reference. While transcripts of interviews do not contain the emotional cues from body language and tone of voice, their very flatness can bring awkward questions into sharp relief. Elizabeth Goodman, author and Ph.D. student, watched videos of interviews and was surprised: "I was doing a lot of interviews in cafes for a study, and would routinely order myself a coffee and a cookie in the afternoons to keep up my energy. It wasn't until I watched the video myself that I realized just how much I was talking. In the next interviews, I tried to make myself talk less. But somehow I just couldn't

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stop myself from blabbing away. Finally, I cut out the caffeine and sugar—success! Besides giving up the caffeine and sugar before interviews, I also now have come up with a set of techniques to help me give interviewees lots of time to think. If appropriate, I sip from a glass of water whenever I'm tempted to talk. I make notes of my questions and promise myself I'll ask them later. I bite my lip and nod sympathetically. Basically, I do whatever it takes to keep my mouth shut."

Critique

You can observe a lot by just watching.
—Yogi Berra

Atul Gawande wrote in *The New Yorker* about the power of coaching to help develop skills. He was focusing on the work of a surgeon, but the notion applies here as well [2]. Ask your co-fieldworker to monitor and comment on your technique (or bring someone along for that purpose). Or have them watch your videos or read

over your transcripts and give you feedback.

Todd Hausman, design researcher at LinkedIn, reminds us that "nothing helps vet a tough question like a fresh set of eyes. I love to get feedback on my questions from people with absolutely no background or knowledge in the subject area I'm researching. I often test my questions with my mom, and I listen for one key phrase: 'No one really talks like that, Todd.'"

Julie listens to a lot of sports radio. Dan Patrick is a very good, conversational interviewer, really great at getting some rather famous people to speak candidly and off the cuff. During one show, though, he recalled an interview that will always haunt him. He described that interview as "Question. Answer. Question. Answer. Question. Answer...Terrible!" The acute disappointment he felt was evident in his voice. While there was some comfort in realizing that someone at his level still falls into this interviewing trap, more important, his reflection has stuck as a reminder of

using the interview to drive toward stories rather than just asking questions.

Exchange

*A funny thing happened
on the way to the theater.*

—Vaudeville joke introduction

***I left that house
with a real sense of
accomplishment:
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discomfort.***

Fieldwork takes you to strange locations to meet new people. Despite the best-laid plans, surprises will happen and some amount of mayhem will ensue. While the surprises you aren't prepared for can bring tremendous insight (see our earlier column, "What to Expect When You're Not Expecting It," March + April 2011), they also leave you with stories. Those stories are embarrassing, outrageous, often instructive, usually hilarious, and serve as symbols of your gradually accreting stature as an interviewer.

Here's Julie, with the de rigueur animal story: "One of the more challenging interviews I ever conducted featured a chihuahua who had the run of the house, and

a living room with no furniture. The participant and I sat on the floor, while the rambunctious critter crawled all over me, nibbling and clawing, for the entire interview. Obviously, this canine's behavior was accepted and sanctioned in everyday life in this household. I did my best to roll with it, not letting the distractions interfere with my objectives or, more important, with my curiosity about this person. I left that house with a real sense of accomplishment: The participant never knew the extent of my physical discomfort. One must blend—pets, children, evidence of hoarding and odors notwithstanding."

Corin Ludwig, a design researcher at Design Concepts, shares a harrowing story: "I have traveled around the world, always trying new tastes and experiences. I've been to India and didn't get sick at all. I've been to China and tried the chicken paw and the sea cucumber. In Japan I ate sea urchin and street food. But I went to Boston and was crippled by a plate of tiny mollusks, served raw.

Never eat anything adventurous or raw the night before research!

The night before research started, we had dinner at one of the famous chowder houses. I was sick all night and went through all of the tummy meds I brought with me. The next day all I could do was hand my protocol over to my client and hold the camera. At one point in the interview I had to excuse myself. I ran to the bathroom only to find it locked and barely made it to the kitchen sink. Nothing in my preparedness kit could have fixed this mess. My client did a great job of staying cool and asking questions of the participants. We made it through the research and learned some lessons: Always write protocols so someone else can easily follow and take over if need be. Never eat anything adventurous or raw the night before research!"

To further this exchange, we have set up an ever-growing archive of fieldwork "war stories" at <http://www.portigal.com/series/warstories/>. Please check them out and post your own.

By looking at the best practices of talented interviewers, we've seen a range of ways to practice, reflect, critique, and exchange. There are so many different ways to develop as an interviewer [3], but most crucial to remember is that everyone who does this work well does something to practice it. We start asking questions soon after being born, but it takes a lifetime of work to become a great interviewer.

Endnotes

1. Portigal, S. *The Art and Craft of User Research Interviews*. Rosenfeld Media, Forthcoming; <http://rosenfeldmedia.com/books/user-interviews/>)
2. Gawande, A. Personal Best. *The New Yorker*. October 3, 2011; http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/10/03/111003fa_fact_gawande).
3. You can find additional tactics at <http://www.portigal.com/blog/tips-to-improve-your-interviewing-skills-and-a-request-for-more/>

About the author

Steve Portigal is the founder of Portigal Consulting, a bite-sized firm that helps clients to discover and act on new insights about themselves and their customers. In the past 15 years, Portigal has interviewed hundreds of people, including families eating breakfast, hotel maintenance staff, architects, rock musicians, home-automation enthusiasts, credit-default swap traders, and radiologists. His work has informed the development of mobile devices, medical information systems, music gear, wine packaging, financial services, corporate intranets, videoconferencing systems, and iPod accessories. He writes regularly on topics from interaction design to pop culture for interactions, Core77, Ambidextrous, Johnny Holland and the Portigal Consulting blog, All This ChittahChattah. He is an avid photographer who has a Museum of Foreign Groceries in his home.

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