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An Interview with Dr. Festus E. Obiakor: How to Flourish in Academia

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Abstract

The purpose of this semi-structured interview, comprised of 13 questions, lasting 42:00 minutes, was to learn more about effective interviewing techniques through engaging in the actual process of interviewing, and to learn how to flourish in academia (through actively publishing/writing). The interviewer interviewed an academic in the field of education (multicultural education) about how to negotiate higher education and be successful (flourish in academia). Evaluation of the interview indicates that interviewing is a skill that needs to be practiced to be improved.

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Qualitative Research

I would like to begin this interview reflection/process paper by including a short poem written by a fifth-grade student who attended the school I taught at for the 2008-2009 school year. The poem is entitled *Letter for My Father*.

If you left my mom does that mean you left me too?
 That would break my heart and make me feel so blue.
 I call your house and you're not there,
 I just have a talk with Jesus just to say a little prayer.
 I pray one day that you will come home,
 but if you don't, please don't leave me alone.
 Alone in the world to fend for myself,
 where people only care about money and wealth.
 A young Black man without a father,
 most people don't care or want to be bothered.
 Some days I am okay, I even say I am fine,
 some days I am just losing my mind.
 So I pull it together because life really must go on,
 I know I am speaking loudly even though you don't like my tone.
 Something must be said even when it's wrong,
 so for all kids out there whose father may be gone,
 just know you important, and you will never be alone.
 So I am writing this letter, just to say hope you be a man,
 and come see me some day.
 I want you to read this letter and if you don't,
 I will have peace with myself even if you won't.

Qualitative research methods possess much strength its sister (quantitative research methods) lacks. One of these strengths is its ability to describe and clarify the human experience. The fifth-grader who wrote this poem has deep feelings and longings. Quantitative research methods are unable to expose and speak truth to this student's existence/experience. However, qualitative research methods are able to collect and use this poem as a piece of data.

This fifth-grader was assigned to my classroom for a period of 3 days. He was serving an in-school removal/detention. I immediately saw something unique and intellectual in his persona. He responded to my interests and shared with me over the 3 days his passion for writing. I never viewed my behavior as interviewing; however, after reflecting, I suppose we were both engaged in an interview. Polkinghorne (2005) states that “the most used approach to qualitative data gathering [is] participant interviews” (p. 137). Quantitative research is incapable of providing this level of experiential insight. I feel research needs to be accessible to all readers, not only academics. Foley and Valenzuela (2005) would both agree that the move from pedantic, scholarly, jargon-filled writings and research to “citizen-scholars” is something desirable.

Overview

The process or protocol I followed for this interview was very deliberate. Initially I was reticent about selecting someone I already knew; however, after reflecting and thinking about whom I should interview, I knew that I wanted to learn more about higher education and how to thrive and be successful. Prior to my arrival at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (hereafter UW-M) for the Urban Education Doctoral Program (UEDP), I had researched the various faculties. I searched UW-M’s web pages and researched faculty’s research agendas. Among the many UW-M professors, Dr. Obiakor came to resound in my psyche for many reasons. He was of color, his research was interested in multicultural education, and I had already read one of his books, *It Even Happens in Good Schools*.

After arriving at UW-M, I continued to cultivate a working relationship with Dr. Obiakor. I called him on several occasions, and he even furnished his personal cellular

phone number and instructed me to call him whenever I needed to talk. This provision of a phone number made me feel secure in that I had a professional friendship with Dr. Obiakor. For all of these reasons, and many more, I chose to approach him with the idea of allowing me to interview him.

The reflective processes I have just described follow good qualitative research practice in that Polkinghorne (2005) says, “The purposive selection of data sources involves choosing people or documents from which the researcher can substantially learn about [his/her] experience” (p. 140). This was also significant because Dr. Obiakor was willing to be interviewed. Polkinghorne (2005) goes on to state, “Thus, gathering participants involves not only choosing those who fit a selection strategy but also finding people who are willing to be interviewed” (p. 141).

Having read previous works of Dr. Obiakor prior to our interview was advantageous to me (the interviewer) because it sent the message to the interviewee (Dr. Obiakor) that I was serious, committed, and had a vested interest in hearing his thoughts and concerns. Additionally, it also allowed me to become an *insider* insofar as there was a co-creation of trust. This trust was valuable because Dr. Obiakor’s answers were candid and not contrived.

Purpose

The purpose of this personal interview was threefold. As a result of my interview I wished to:

- 1.) learn more about the effective interviewing techniques through engaging in the actual process of interviewing,
- 2.) fulfill a course requirement for CURRINS 729, and

3.) learn how to flourish in academia (through actively publishing/writing).

Interview and Format

The semi-structured interview, comprised of 13 questions (see Appendix A) lasted 42:00 minutes. After I arrived for the interview (held in Dr. Obiakor's office) I offered him an explanation about the interview. What follows is how I outlined the purpose of the interview:

The reason I have asked you (Dr. Obiakor) for an interview is because you have been successful getting your work published, as well as writing numerous books. I want to have the same joy and successes when I enter the academy as a holder of a Ph.D.

Next is the explanation I shared with Dr. Obiakor about the way information from our interview would be incorporated into my CURRINS 729 assignment:

Dr. Obiakor, this research/interview will help me to learn about the elements that make a successful writer and academic. I will incorporate various transcribed portions of this interview into my CURRINS 729 assignment.

There were technical issues that I addressed from the outset with Dr. Obiakor, which I accomplished as follows:

Dr. Obiakor, I would like to, with your permission, write some of your interview responses down to help me better recall what you have said. With your permission, I would also like to record this interview with my Digital Voice Recorder (DVR) so that I can transcribe it later and not be tied to pen and paper as we talk; is this okay?

Evaluation of the Interview

After the interview was completed I listened to the digitally recorded WAV file. I then manually transcribed (see Appendix B) the most poignant, or salient discourse. I was shocked to read the transcriptions insofar as they did not accurately capture the discourse that I experience first-hand as the interviewer. As Polkinghorne (2005) delineates:

It is the normal practice in qualitative interviewing to audio record the sessions. The recordings are transcribed, passing from the original oral form into written form. The purpose of the conversation into a written account is to allow the detailed and to-and-fro reading required in the analysis of the qualitative data. However, information present in the oral recording is lost in transformation. Lost is the way in which things were said, the pacing, the intonation, and the emphasis in the talk. (p. 142)

Upon reflecting on qualitative research methods, I have learned that I would much rather conduct an interview in a very informal way and later write down the most important aspects. The reason I feel informality is a stronger way to interview is because it's more natural. Natural conversations make both the interviewer and interviewee comfortable. Comfort allows for more honesty, and honesty and accuracy are two mainstays that provide good, sound research. Foley and Valenzuela (2005) state this notion similarly: “[...] we used a conversational or dialogic style of interviewing, which encouraged the subjects to participate more” (p. 223). Later Foley and Valenzuela (2005) speak to the advantages of informality of interviews:

In short, a more open-ended, conversational interviewing style generated more engaged personal narratives and more candid opinions. It also tended to humanize the interviewer and diminish her power and control of the interview process. (p. 223).

I noticed that having pre-written questions and digitally recording the interview allowed me to hang on Dr. Obiakor's answers/responses and allowed me to be an active listener. This was an advantage as I really enjoyed learning from the experience. I feel that so often we go into research with a preconceived notion of reality, and if we do not encounter this, we are perplexed and even angered. I do not feel that this is the purpose of research. Research must unearth and uncover unknowns and things unthought-of.

I know I have much to learn in order to become an effective ethnographer and qualitative researcher. The unitary way to improve interview technique is through

conducting interviews personally and learning how to interview well. As Frankel and Devers (2000) write, “We invite you to discover the excitement and rewards of qualitative research by trying it out yourself” (p. 260). I have a teachable personality and look forward to improving my interviewing repertoire. I am in need of what the fifth-grader needed: someone to speak with. Who will teach me?

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

- “I have read that you have held a variety of positions at various institutions of higher education. Briefly tell me about these positions.”
- “Tell me about being a professor on this campus (UW-Milwaukee).”
- “Is the expression, ‘publish or perish’ accurate?”
- “You wrote *Publish and Flourish: A Guide for Writing in Education*. What compelled you to write this?”
 - “Tell me, how do you ‘catch the writing bug’?”
- “What advice do you give for aspiring Ph.D.s, in terms of preparation for becoming successful in academia, as it relates to a good publication record?”
- “How can we improve in *not* misidentifying and miscategorizing special needs learners?”
- “What prompted you to aspire to become a college professor?”
- “Tell me about your professional relationship with Dr. (Bob) Algozzine.”
- “Describe your process for writing books. Is this process different than when you write journal articles?”
- “How do you balance family and academia and flourish in both?”
- “Are you currently writing anything?”
- “Tell me about the genesis of www.mltonline.org and its purpose.”
- “Tell me about the 2008 NAME conference, *Beyond Celebrating Diversity: ReACTivating the Equity and Social Justice Roots of Multicultural Education*. What did you present?”

Appendix B

Portions of Interview Transcribed

Interviewer (pre-planned): “You wrote, *Publish and Flourish: A Guide for Writing in Education*. What compelled you to write this? Tell me, how do you ‘catch the writing bug’?”

Dr. Obiakor: “Yeah, you know what, I’ll tell you what you did pretty good research on me. People say publish and perish. From my perspective you actually flourish when you publish. [...]”

Interviewer (not pre-planned): “So how is Bob. How is it working with him? How is he as a person?”

Dr. Obiakor: “Oh it is wonderful. He knows I am a scholar and he treats me with respect. We talk as brothers and sisters. When I do the editor’s comments for the journal. It is kind of interesting because I am very hard-hitting when I write. He doesn’t make one single editorial comment; he just says, ‘beautiful.’ When you work with such a personality; being a white man sometimes I ask him, “What do you think? Don’t you get upset the way I write?” He said, Festus, you said the truth, and that’s a true scholar. Let the truth be out there. It’s the truth. Let the truth be out there. So, we work together and we enjoy our friendship because we believe in the same things. He said he came from the other side of the street; then I came in through the backdoor. So both of us; two of us; will be making a difference in the field.