

Anecdotes and Opinions: Examining Evidence Generated by Group Interview Methods

Michael J. Culbertson and Emily Gates
Department of Educational Psychology
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

This document is a speaking draft for a presentation on October 18, 2014 at the annual meeting of the American Evaluation Association, Denver, CO.

- I'd like to tell you about Emily.
 - Young evaluator, working in an evaluation center at a large research university
- Emily was tasked with the evaluation of the Global Institute for Secondary Educators.
 - Program run by the US Department of State
 - Bringing 30 high school educators from around the world to study US Culture for 6 weeks
- Emily shared an office with another evaluator named Michael.
 - "Hey, Michael," Emily said one day, "I'm really sorry to bother you since I know you're really busy and all, but do you have a minute?"
 - "Of course!" Michael replied, eager for an excuse to take a break from what he was working on.
 - "I'm a little stuck with the Global Institute evaluation," Emily went on. "I have a feeling we're missing something."
 - "What, those daily feedback surveys aren't enough?"
 - "Oh, you know that the program staff wanted daily feedback on each session since it's a new curriculum—we'll cut down on the surveys for next year's cohort. But, I don't mean the formal curriculum. When I talk with participants informally in between class, they're always telling me these juicy nuggets about things that happen to them—things that seems to be shaping their view of American culture—but I don't have any way to systematically capture these experiences. Sometimes I wonder if the informal cross-cultural experiences the participants are having are more influential than all the lectures and workshops."
 - "I'd believe it," Michael said. "The State Department's purpose for this program is to increase understanding of US Culture abroad, and seeing and living the culture first hand is surely more formative—is going to

stick with the participants more—than sitting through some lecture. It’s almost as if the program *is* the experience—the first-hand experience of America and Americans.”

- “Right!” Emily went on. “But we don’t get any of that from the surveys.”
- “Well, you have focus groups planned at the end of the program, right?”
- “Yeah, but I’m not sure our usual focus groups are going to get at the heart of it. The way I’ve typically structured a focus group asks participants to share their thoughts and opinions—I’m not so much interested in the participants’ *judgments* about American culture as the *way* in which the program shaped those judgments—which is most likely through these informal experiences, not the lectures. But, I’m not sure I can just ask participants ‘How did being in America change your perceptions of Americans?’ because they may not really *know* how their experiences are shaping their opinions. After all, they’ve only been here a few weeks, and those weeks have been *packed*—they’re probably experiencing some stimulation overload and haven’t had time or space to process everything to the point of being able to reflect metacognitively on how their experiences are shaping their views. And to top it off, I’m sure some participants have gone through conflicting or ambiguous experiences, making it difficult to come up with a single judgment to share. I just don’t think asking for their thoughts about their experience is going to get at what we’re looking for, here.”
- “Hmm, tricky,” Michael said, musing for a moment. “Hey, I know! I just saw a paper¹ recently in the *Journal of Development Effectiveness* about this group interview technique called *anecdote circles*. It’s something that came out the field of business and is all about using storytelling to capture people’s experience. Let me send you the paper and you can see what you think.”
- Emily opened up the article and started reading about a study that capitalized on storytelling to develop a rich description of what it was like to live in a poor, urban, mixed-race settlement in South Africa. The article outlined three “rules” for participants:
 - Don’t interrupt any speaker while they are speaking.
 - Focus on experiences and examples.
 - Rather than disagreeing with someone, tell the story how you remember

¹ Carter, J. (2009). Evaluate experiences: A qualitative technique to complement quantitative impact assessments. *Journal of Development Effectiveness*, 1, 86–102.
doi:10.1080/19439340902727628

it.

- These were accompanied by three rules for facilitators:
 - Use “when” and “where” in their prompting questions rather than “how” or “why.”
 - Encourage a process of one-upmanship, where participants try outdoing each other by telling a more dramatic story.
 - Allow story tellers to displace their experiences and tell them as if they happened to someone else.
- “This is great!” Emily said to Michael later. “I think anecdote circles would really capture the crucial informal component of the Global Institute experience. I wish there were more written about the use of anecdote circles in evaluation—it seems like they could be really helpful for a lot of evaluations of more experiential type programs.”
 - At this, as a methodologist, Michael’s ears perked up a bit.
 - “Wouldn’t it be interesting to do a comparison of more traditional focus groups and anecdote circles? What if we created two parallel protocols that tap into the same concepts, but one from a perspective of participants’ thoughts and opinions and another from the perspective of their stories and experiences. We could compare the character data we get from both. With a better understanding of the character of the evidence that each type of prompt elicits, evaluators could make a more informed choice about which approach to use in order to best support the types of inferences they’re interested in making.”
- Emily thought it was a great idea, and the two set out to craft parallel protocols, one to solicit thoughts and opinions, and the other to solicit stories and experiences.
 - They started by writing a purpose statement:
 - What is it about the cross-cultural experience of being an English teacher who comes to the US for this SUSI program that is meaningful, personally and professionally?
- Then they identified three domains around which to craft the interview questions:
 - First, since the State Department’s goal was to increase US cultural understanding abroad, it was Emily and Michael felt it was important to know not only what *participants* learned while in the US, but what they would *share with others* when they got back.
 - Second, they figured that many of the moments that were filled with the

most meaning and the most formative would be those high and low points of participants' experiences.

- Finally, they reasoned that some of the most salient points for the participants might come from a sense of discord or disconnect—moments when the differences between participants' home cultures and US culture were most apparent.
- What they would share, the highs and lows, and the differences in cultures—these served as the seeds for the three interview prompts.
- The *Ultimate Guide to Anecdote Circles* recommends using emotional words in the questions for anecdote circles because memory is strongly enhanced by the strength of emotions that accompany an event—either positive or negative.² Strong emotions tell the brain, “Hey, this is important—remember this.” So, getting participants to recall an emotion is likely going to get them to recall the experience that went with it.
- Emily and Michael balanced emotional words in the anecdote circle prompts with cognitive words in the focus group prompts.
- Here's what they come up with:
 - As you prepare to go back to your home country, what is the **most important thing** will you tell your colleagues or students about Americans and the U.S.?
 - As you prepare to go back to your home country, what **stories** will you tell your colleagues or students about Americans and the U.S.?
 - As an English teacher, what has been the **best or worst** part of: Your participation in the SUSI program? Your free time being in the US?
 - Think about your experience coming to the U.S. as an English teacher for the SUSI program. Share a time when you have felt **excited or disappointed**.
 - What are the **main differences** between American culture and your home culture?
 - Imagine an interaction you had with an American during your time here in which you were **surprised**. Describe the interaction for us.
- The two methods also required different probes.

² Callahan, S., Rixon, A., Schenk, M. (2006). *The Ultimate Guide to Anecdote Circles: A Practical Guide to Facilitating Storytelling and Story Listening*.
http://www.anecdote.com/pdfs/papers/Ultimate_Guide_to_ACs_v1.0.pdf

- The focus group used typical thinking probes like:
 - What do you mean by ... ?
 - Why do you say that ... ?
 - What do others think about that? Do you agree or disagree?
- Whereas, the anecdote circle used probes that elicited story details such as:
 - Could you give an example of something that happened to illustrate that?
 - What experience are you drawing on?
 - Where/when did that happen?
 - Who else was there?
 - How did [person] do [action]?
 - Does anyone have a related story about that?
- With the protocols in place, it was just a matter of waiting for the big day.
 - The 30 high school teachers, one time strangers, bonded through a common experience of lectures and workshops, field trips and shopping trips, soaking in English and American culture through planned activities and everyday living.
 - When their 6 weeks were nearly done, Emily invited the group to the office. After grabbing plates of stuffed grape leaves, pita, and hummus, the pre-assigned groups settled in for a time of mutual processing and sharing of their common experience.
- “That was *amazing!*” Emily exclaimed to Michael after the participants had gone. Emily had conducted the first anecdote circle protocol, and her participants had experienced such a bonding over their shared stories that they insisted on taking a group photo together when the session was over.
 - “Yeah, my focus group session wasn’t nearly so moving... interesting, informative even, but not moving, exactly.”
 - “I can’t wait to get the transcripts back to start comparing the data!”
- When the transcripts finally arrived, Emily ran through them immediately.
 - “This is really great,” Emily said. “Here, take a look at this. Participants in both kinds of groups talked about how friendly Americans were. Here’s a sample from one of the focus groups.”
 - I like the fact that Americans are very friendly and very willing to help. Whenever we went to the supermarket or people on the bus, they were willing to help us, to show us the way, smiling most of the times.

- “It’s a summary judgment followed by a reason based in experience, but the reason is fairly digested and abstract. Here’s another example:”
- They’re cheerful people, I would say, from what I’ve experienced on the street, or in some public places, or being with host families. Very polite, very warm, very welcoming. Something like that.
- “But look at this passage from an anecdote circle:”
- When we got here, on the first weekend we were taken to the supermarket [...] it was a big group and I went to get some tea. And she came to me and she asked me, “Oh where are you from?” And I said, “I’m French.” And what about the rest of the group? So I explained the program and she was so happy and, “Oh we’re so happy that you are here. And we are very happy. Welcome.” And she kept in touch with us every time I go back to the supermarket. And she was really friendly and she wanted to know about the program and about everyone which I found very nice from somebody just working in a supermarket who had nothing to do with us, but she was very nice.
- “Interesting,” Michael said, “It’s much more tangible, and you can really see how the participant came to believe that Americans are friendly: The supermarket clerk not only expressed an interest in her, but remembered her each time she went back. It’s that kind of unexpected and repeated event that forms one’s opinions. Here, take a look at this example:”
- Something surprised me with my host family. Before I came here I was told that the American people, what they consider most is money. And I had a previous experience. Last winter we went to Washington DC, and then we went to Dallas. I realized that people were really busy and nobody cared about nobody. People would come and pass by faster, when you greet them, hardly they can respond. So that time I say, ok maybe what people say is true: American people only money know. [...] But I was surprised when we were invited to go to Mr. K. [...] he took us and we went to the parades. He took all this time to explain everything. And when we went to his home, his wife was there, she had already finished cooking, they invited some neighbors, they came and we spent almost four to five hours. They were so interested in us. They were so friendly that I felt really confused. [laughter] And finally I say, okay maybe because they are old people, that’s why. And last Sunday when we were invited to go to Grace Community that time the person who came for me was a young man. I might be older than him. He came and collect us and we went to the church. When we finished the prayer he invited us to the restaurant. I had been told that when American people invite you to restaurant you should be prepared because when you eat there you are going to pay. [laughter] I

checked if I had money, [more laughter] we ordered and we finished eating. When the waiter came, he said, “oh no, let me pay.” I said, “what?!” He said, “I am going to pay.” And he paid. He took us back here. I am really confused. I don’t know where to put my head now. Can I say that American people are friendly? Or I don’t know, I’m confused.

- “Wow,” Emily said, “you can really see how he’s wrestling with conflicting experiences there. The focus group prompts seem to elicit fully formed opinions—I’m not sure we’ll see as many ambiguous or partially formed understandings in those transcripts.”
- Emily and Michael began working on a coding protocol to sort through the discourses and categorize the claims, reasons, and stories that the cognitively and experientially oriented prompts elicited.
 - To make a long story short, they decided to present some of their early experiences to other evaluators interested in qualitative methods at AEA.
 - And after sharing his story with the session participants, Michael invited the participants to share a few stories of their own.
- Think about a time you were more interested in participants’ experiences of a program than their opinions of it. What happened that you found frustrating or exciting?
- Tell us about a time you drew on (or saw someone draw on) narrative or storytelling in an evaluation.
- Imagine that you’re facing a choice between opinion-oriented and experience-oriented data collection. What led you to this choice? How will you decide?