

Email interviewing: the 'pen-pal' method

What is it?

Researchers enter into a personal dialogue with learners by email. This can be used to collect reflective, written contributions from learners over an extended period of time.

Strengths

- Can record experiences that learners might subsequently forget.
- Can build up a picture of the process of studying as it happens and track developments.
- Allows the researcher to personalize the questions asked at other data collection points.
- Minimal intrusion into learners' time.
- Uses a basic, robust technology which stores data automatically.
- Maximises sustained participation through establishing a personal dialogue between researcher and learner.

Weaknesses

- Time intensive for the researcher to craft individual questions and follow up responses.
- Inconsistency in timing and content of questions across students and courses. This may be important if you are looking to combine data across participants.
- Researcher and learner are both subjectively involved in interpretation as they compose their exchanges, which means careful checking for validity against other sources of data (triangulation)

Process

1. Each learner is allocated to a single, named researcher, who signs their messages personally.
2. Questions are adapted for each learner so that they take into account the course the student is taking and any prior knowledge about their own individual experiences as a starting point.
3. Timing of messages is organized to coincide with significant events, whilst avoiding busy periods close to assignment deadlines or exams.
4. Researchers follow up with secondary questions or comments as appropriate.

Examples from the Learner Experience projects

The Thema project has been soliciting written contributions from research participants by email, four or five times over an eight month period. This 'pen-pal' method is used in combination with a traditional interview to build a portrait of each learner.

