Teaching Interviewing Skills Through Story Games

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Why Games to Teach Interviewing?

Years ago, I worked in a program which paired children and elders. The children were to meet with the elders and elicit some of their life-stories. My job was to prepare the children for their role as interviewers.

How would I do this? I had no idea!

I remembered, however, my experiences being interviewed by students for their class newspapers. Time and again, the students would appear with a carefully compiled list of questions to ask me. They might begin with a question like, "How did you become a storyteller?" I might answer, "Well, I began by telling stories to my younger brother...."

Then they'd continue with the second question on their list. "Did you ever tell stories as a child?" I'd be furious! Hadn't they listened to my first answer?

Based on these experiences, I knew I wanted the students to learn to ask questions, not from a list, but from what they had just heard. How could I help them learn that skill and get practice at it? It seemed that a game might be the best way.

So I created a first game and tried it out. Then I brought in some elders for the children to interview. Oops! A new difficulty presented itself. So I created another game to deal with this second issue. By the time I had worked with a few groups in this way, I had a half-dozen games that seemed to prepare the students well enough.

In the process of trying to articulate what the children needed to learn, I realized that interviewing skills are similar to story-crafting skills.
In both story-crafting and interviewing, you complete the story in your mind through your own activity. In crafting a story, you decide what more to imagine; in interviewing, you ask questions to fill in what you need to make a complete imagined picture.

I have used these games with students in grades 4 through 8 (ages 9 through 13). All but one use me as the subject. This lets me:

- make the game more lively
- educate the students through my responses.

**Closed-ended and Open-ended Questions**

A good interviewer uses two different kinds of questions, each with an appropriate purpose. Closed-ended questions require specific answers, such as "Yes," "No," or "I was ten years old." Open-ended questions call for non-specific answers; they often invite the teller to tell more stories.

Here are some examples of closed-ended questions:

"Did you like school?"
"What was your sister's name?"
"How old were you when you got your first job?"

These, on the other hand, are open-ended questions:

"What were some things you liked about school?"
"What sorts of games did you and your sister play together?"
"What was it like for you to stop school and go to work?"

Closed-ended questions are useful for extracting particular information. If the interviewer is confused about when something happened, a closed-ended question gets the answer quickly.

Close-ended questions can help a shy interviewee get started. Some experienced interviewers always begin an interview by asking a few closed-ended questions whose answers will be "yes." This can put the interviewee at ease enough to answer a more open-ended question.

Closed-ended questions are also useful for stopping a story that goes on too long. A series of closed-ended questions requiring only a yes or no answer will almost certainly cause anyone to stop offering information freely.

Open-ended questions, conversely, start the flow of narrative. As a result, they are more useful to the interviewer who wants to elicit stories. Young interviewers, especially, tend to need instruction in the art of the open-ended question.

**What Fairy Tale Character Am I?**

This story-game has two goals: to sensitize interviewers to the flow-stopping effect of closed-ended questions; and to encourage interviewers to ask questions based on what they have just heard.
I begin the game with the following explanation:

This is a guessing game. I will pretend to be a character from a fairy tale. Your job will be to guess who I am.

You can ask me questions about my life, and I'll answer them. But there are two special kinds of questions in this game.

One special kind of question is the "yes/no" question. These questions can be answered with just one word, "yes," or "no." Everytime you ask me one of these questions, I get a point on the blackboard. If I get five points, I win the game.

Another kind of question is the "follow-up" question. A follow-up question asks about something I just said. Everytime someone asks a follow-up question, you get a point on the board. Everytime you get three points, you can make one guess about who I am.

The game proceeds with me answering questions as though I am, say, Rapunzel. My job is not only to answer the questions, but to judge the correct amount of information to give.

With younger children, I might be quite forth-coming. With older or more experienced interviewers, on the other hand, I might give evasive answers that conceal as much information as possible.

In either case, my primary goal is not to fool the players, but to point out effective questions when they ask them.

The Hidden Mystery

As an interviewer, I have often found myself sure that I had stumbled on a significant story, but could not quite elicit it from the interviewee. For example, I once interviewed a 10-year-old student in front of her class, as an demonstration for them of how to interview.

The student was telling how she had left her home in the Caribbean some years before. The scene of her departure for the United States seemed important to me, but her description of it lacked any feeling or sense of story-line. Finally, I began to imagine the scene in detail. I asked her exactly where she was when she said goodbye to her family. I asked her what time of day it was.

Finally, I asked who was present. When she answered, I noticed she omitted her sister. When I asked, "Where was your sister," she told us: her sister had gone to school already, and she never got to say goodbye to her.

This was the significant part of the story, but I could only elicit it by carefully imagining every aspect of the entire scene. To help students develop this skill, I tell them:
I'm going to tell you a story that has a hidden mystery in it. Everything about the story is ordinary, except one thing.

You have to ask me questions until you get me to tell you the one unusual thing.

Try to imagine the entire scene. It may help if you think about questions that start with words like "who, when, or where."

Then, I respond to their questions, gradually telling a story about a day when I had a tea party for some of my friends - and one of my friends was a pink rhinoceros. When they force me to describe the pink rhino, they have won the game. As usual, I comment on perceptive and helpful questions as they ask them.

**Before & After**

A good interviewer not only elicits stories, but also extends the stories by exploring themes.

For example, if the interviewee has just told a story about a childhood quarrel with a brother, the interviewer might pursue the theme by asking, "Were there other times you two quarreled? Tell me about them." If that question leads to a series of stories about rousing good arguments, the interviewer might eventually ask, "Do you two still fight?"

In this way, the interviewer responds to a story by extending one of its themes back to its beginnings and up to its end, or at least to its status in the present.

To help students develop this more advanced interviewing skill, I might tell them a true story from my life, for example about the time I accidentally threw a stone through a car windshield, and then was so frightened I lied about having done it. The story I tell should seem complete in itself, but also have several possible themes in it.

Then, I encourage the students to ask me "before" questions or "after" questions that develop a theme in my story. Examples might include, "Tell us about the first time you ever lied," or "Was there a time after that when you got that scared again? Tell us about it." For each appropriate theme-building question, I give them a point for "before" or for "after". When they have reached, say, 5 points in each column, I declare them the winners!

**The Awful Interviewer**

To highlight over-all interview decorum once the students have played all of the other games, I will role-play being the worst interviewer I can be.

With a student volunteer as interviewee, I will ask a series of closed-ended questions without taking into account - or even waiting for - the answers. I will start to talk about my own
experiences at length. I will give advice or speak judgmentally about what the interviewee says. I may even insult the interviewee or get distracted by something in the environment.

After the brief demonstration, I ask the students to describe some of awful things I did.

**Next Steps**

After learning these games, a group will probably be ready to practice interviewing a volunteer accomplice, such as a teacher or the principal. During the interview, if necessary, I can offer reminders about a principle or two that they may have forgotten in their excitement. Later, I can offer the group appreciations about their interviewing.

After a successful interview or two with me present, the students can be sent in groups or individually to interview community members or family members.

Having played the above games and then applied the lessons in a supervised interview, there is an excellent chance that they will be able to treat their interviewees with respect, elicit their stories, and follow-up on what they hear with perceptive questions.

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