

January 2011

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Julia Ellis  
*University of Alberta*

Vera Janjic-Watrich  
*University of Alberta*

Vicki Macris  
*University of Alberta*

Richelle Marynowski  
*University of Alberta*

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### Recommended Citation

Ellis, Julia; Janjic-Watrich, Vera; Macris, Vicki; and Marynowski, Richelle (2011) "Using Exploratory Interviews to Re-frame Planned Research on Classroom Issues," *Northwest Journal of Teacher Education*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15760/nwjte.2011.9.1.1>

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## Using Exploratory Interviews to Re-frame Planned Research on Classroom Issues

Julia Ellis, Vera Janjic-Watrich, Vicki Macris and Richelle Marynowski  
University of Alberta

### Abstract

*In this paper we describe and illustrate the use of an exploratory first interview to refine research questions or interviewing ideas prior to finalizing plans for a study about classroom issues or practices. Three researchers give accounts of their exploratory interviews concerning student “aliteracy,” the school experience of immigrant students, and mathematics teachers’ experience of assessment and grading. The researchers endeavored to acquire an holistic understanding of their participants’ experiences by: using open-ended questions about both the topic and the participants’ lives in general; asking participants to complete pre-interview activities such as drawings or diagrams about either the topic or their lives in general; and framing the guiding data collection question as “How does the participant experience [topic of interest]?” Each of the researchers either revised their research questions or changed their ideas about how to do the interviews based upon what transpired in these interviews.*

The value of research on classroom issues or practices depends upon the use of pertinent research questions and productive approaches to any interviews undertaken. In this article we suggest that even before conducting pilot studies or undertaking large-scale field-testing of data collection activities, it can be helpful to “test the water” through an initial exploratory interview. In what follows, three researchers report on a first interview with a “field test” participant and explain how what they learned prompted them to re-frame or refocus either their research questions or interview plans. The particular processes employed in their interviews, and highlighted in this article, enabled the researchers to acquire a more holistic understanding of their participants’ experiences of the research topics and alerted them to important whole-part relationships. The understandings and insights the researchers acquired prompted them to either or both re-focus their research questions and/or alter their ideas about interview approaches. The three interviews were concerned with the phenomenon of student aliteracy, the school experience of immigrant students, and mathematics teachers’ experience of assessment and grading.

### Qualitative research, constructivist paradigm, and hermeneutics

Qualitative research conducted in the constructivist/interpretive paradigm is necessarily hermeneutical (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Key themes from hermeneutics include the importance of clarifying whole-part relationships to inform more adequate interpretation, aiming for holistic understanding rather than reducing what is learned to pre-existing categories, and appreciating that the language and history of one’s community both enable and limit interpretation (Smith, 1991; Smith, 2002).

Key metaphors from hermeneutics include the hermeneutic circle and understanding interpretive inquiry as a spiral, with each loop in the spiral representing a separate data collection or analysis activity (Ellis, 1998). Each loop in the spiral can also be understood as a distinct hermeneutic circle with its own forward projective arc and backward evaluative arc. In a forward

projective arc, the researcher makes sense of what is encountered by drawing from previous experience or expectations—forestructure and pre-understandings in hermeneutic terms. In the backward arc this first interpretation is evaluated by re-examining the data for contradictions, gaps, or material not adequately explained by the first interpretation. The goal in the backward arc is to develop the most adequate interpretation that best addresses all that was found. What one learns, notices, or recognizes as a new question in the backward arc gives direction or purpose to the next loop or research activity.

If the first research activity in a study is conducted *in the right way* it has the potential to change the direction of the study quite dramatically (Ellis, 1998). Scholars in hermeneutics have clarified that beginning the research, or *entering the hermeneutic circle in the right way* requires: concerned engagement; humility; openness; a capacity for reciprocity and interactive, dialogic interviews; and availability to negotiation of meaning (Packer & Addison, 1989; Smith, 1991; Smith, 1993; Smith 2002). The particular interview processes employed by the researchers in this article were intended to enhance the likelihood of entering the circle in the right way.

### **Processes employed in the interviews**

In a qualitative research course, doctoral students anticipating their dissertation research were encouraged to explore the use of three strategies in a first interview related to their research interests. First, regardless of their research questions, they were asked to frame a main question to guide data collection or the interview in the following format: “How does the participant experience the topic of interest?” Taking this broad view or goal for the interviews could help researchers learn about the participants’ experience holistically. All that was learned could be “mined” for how it related to the initial research question.

Another strategy was to invite participants to complete a pre-interview activity such a drawing, diagram or list that was related to either the research topic or the participant’s life more generally (Ellis, 2006). Examples are:

- Draw a picture of a good day and a not-so-good day with the event/experience of interest.
- Make a diagram to show the support systems in your life or work.
- Make a timeline showing critical events in your experience of the topic.

Participants were offered several pre-interview activities and asked to choose and complete one to bring to the interview. Pre-interview activity choices were related to either the research topic or the participant’s life in general. Learning about a participant’s life more generally could help a researcher to better understand the views the participant expressed about the research topic.

The third strategy was to prepare open-ended interview questions pertaining to the research topic or the participant’s life in general. Examples are:

- What has surprised you about this experience?
- What has been most difficult about this experience?
- What has been most beneficial about this experience?
- Over time, how has this experience changed or stayed the same?

- If you only had to go to school/work three days a week, how would you spend the extra time?

The two strategies of using pre-interview activities and open-ended questions were intended to support participants in recalling and sharing stories related to the research topic or their lives more generally. Participants can only communicate their experiences through narratives (Carr, 1986). If the interview provides a facilitative and inviting space for participants to share many stories researchers can learn what a topic is about for participants—what is salient or meaningful in their experience of the research topic; that is, what is its significance—and can consider a number of whole-part relationships in interpretation.

In the following sections the three researchers provide accounts of their interviews and explain how these informed their plans for undertaking larger studies.

### Researching aliteracy

Vera Janjic-Watrich, a longtime reading specialist and literacy consultant, was concerned about students who appeared to be capable readers but had turned away from and showed little interest in reading. Related literature suggests that this phenomenon, referred to as “aliteracy,” (Mikulecky, 1978) is spreading to young students (Botzakis & Malloy, 2005; National Literacy Trust 2005; Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, 2006). Janjic-Watrich wished to learn why some students “opt in” and some students “opt out” of reading in-and-out of school. To explore a research approach to this question, she interviewed a Grade 9 student about his reading experiences both in and out of school. In the following account Janjic-Watrich explains how the pre-interview activity was pivotal in the success of the interview and how the interview gave direction to a refinement of her research question.

For my interview I worked with a Grade 9 boy who is the son of a friend and colleague. For a pseudonym, my participant suggested “Superman” but I will call him Sam. Because I have been acquainted with the family for over 25 years I already knew a lot about Sam. He is bright, articulate and an honor student who grew up in a rich literacy environment, in an affluent home and has lived a traveled life with parents who are supportive, encouraging and both highly respected teachers in their fields. Although I speculated that Sam would be a reader, having come from a very supportive home where literacy is valued, I did not know for certain what his literacy attitudes, habits, and interests were concerning his reading in-and-outside of school.

Prior to the interview I offered Sam several pre-interview activities to choose from. Sam later explained his strong dislike for doing any kind of drawing activity and his subsequent choice of the only activity that did not require drawing. For his pre-interview activity Sam elected to complete the following metaphor: “Reading in school is \_\_\_\_\_ Reading outside of school is \_\_\_\_\_”

I was entirely surprised at just how valuable the pre-interview activity was in supporting our inquiry process. Creating the metaphors gave Sam the opportunity to “plunge into the depths” of what the research topic meant to him in such a way that I would clearly understand how he experienced reading in-and-outside of school. The metaphors he wrote set the stage for the rest of the interview and gave focus and direction to our conversation. Sam’s metaphors were: *Reading inside of school is like “knives stabbing your throat.” Reading outside of school is like “an imaginary escape where you won’t be harmed.”* Sam’s metaphor of his negative experiences of reading in school was so strong and passionate that I don’t believe any of my questions could have released the same kind of intensity of expression from him about the topic of reading in school. Upon learning these central themes in Sam’s in and out of school reading experiences, I had to

quickly adjust my prepared questions so that they would make sense and be useful follow-up questions to Sam's metaphors.

As the interview proceeded I learned much about what discouraged, impeded or failed to support reading in school and conversely what facilitated reading out of school for Sam. For example, in school Sam experienced inadequate time for reading. He stated, "At school you have the slotted little half hour or 15 minutes and then you are moving on to the next thing. And it is go, go, go, go, go." He also talked about inadequate opportunities for talking to the teacher or librarian about what one was reading, uncomfortable places for reading, no organized promotion of good books, and lack of social support for reading. Sam talked about peer disapproval for showing ability or interest in reading in the following way.

When our teacher says you have free reading period, most kids will just sit there and look at the book and then flip pages or they get a magazine and they don't do anything. And for those who do read, most kids will bug you if it is a big book or if there is anything on it that they might figure out something to bug you about.

In contrast, Sam said the following about reading at home.

Reading at home you can get away from, if you are fighting with someone or something like that, it is so much easier, especially when you get into a good book, you can just sit there and read for hours.... At home you can relax in bed or snuggle up beside a fire and just read your book.... Well, outside of school you can literally escape whatever problems you have. Whatever things you might face, it just depends on whether you have a good book or not.

Through our interview Sam helped me to understand what made reading inviting at home and unlikely at school for him. What I learned prompted me to re-focus my research interest. Instead of asking "why has aliteracy become a phenomenon?" I instead wish to ask about the specific experiences of students who opt in or opt out of reading in-and- outside of school?

### **Researching the school experiences of students who are immigrants**

Vicki Macris's research focus on the experiences of immigrant students in Canadian schools has been given impetus by her own childhood experience of otherness, exclusion, displacement, culture shock and loss of everything familiar to her following her family's repatriation to Greece. As a child she found her transition and subsequent integration into the Greek public school system to be extremely difficult and highly problematic because of inadequate support for her social, linguistic and culturally diverse learning needs. In the following account Macris writes about an initial interview she conducted with a 14 year old student who had immigrated to Canada and was attending an Edmonton school. She tells about the surprises in the interview and how these informed her planned approach for interviews with other students.

For my initial exploration of interviewing a student who had immigrated to Canada I worked with a 14 year old boy whom I will call, Enzo. Because Enzo had been in Canada for five years, I expected that he would be able to recall, reflect upon, and articulate his experiences of school in Canada. Prior to the interview I offered Enzo seven pre-interview activities from which to choose. The one Enzo selected was: "Draw two pictures to show what your schooling (your life at school) was like before you came to your new school in Edmonton and what your life is like now in your school in Edmonton."

My initial surprise in seeing Enzo's drawings was that the images he chose to create had little to do with schooling and much more to do with how he perceived and experienced his life in Canada in general and in Iraq (the last, of several countries he and his family left.) This was just the beginning of my concerns about not getting the answers I imagined I needed.

As Enzo and I sat together around his drawings he began by telling me much about his past.

He talked about how his family had been driven out of his birth country, Kurdistan. He explained that “no one here in Canada knows what Kurdistan is, so I tell them I’m from Iraq.” He talked about being “Kurdish and having no country” and how he feels a sense of belonging in Canada because “people are nice, they care...they are like me.” Enzo’s drawings and related stories ignited my own comments and further questions, thereby supporting an intense dialogue between us.

With the drawings as the centerpiece for starting our interview, Enzo spoke confidently and enthusiastically, taking the lead as he told me much more about his drawings. He described the tumultuous conditions and his (chaotic) schooling experiences and “escape” from Iraq through mountains and valleys in the context of bomb explosions and constant gunfire. His younger brother was killed in one of the bombings. He described his arrival to Canada as finding “the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.”

There were many shifts, twists, and turns in Enzo’s story telling. I had to allow Enzo the space and time to tell his stories in the ways that he would or could. It seemed to me that it was through recalling, telling and searching his stories that Enzo was finding the personal meaning of the experiences—personal meaning that might not be readily available at a conscious level for quick and easy expression. It wasn’t entirely easy to allow Enzo this time and space. When I thought the interview was drifting into other directions I sometimes wanted to draw it back to the questions I was searching answers for, but I consciously resisted. I let Enzo speak and, in time, I got the answers I thought I needed answered and so much more.

Over the course of the interview, Enzo did talk about some of his school experiences. He compared his schooling in Canada to his “circus” (his words) schooling in Iraq where children were “allowed to finish their smoke outside the classroom,” and where, he stated, “teachers didn’t care about education. What education?” Enzo had been to both public and private schools before coming to Canada. He said his mother had to pay so that he “could learn something.” Enzo told happy stories about support from teachers and a favourite classmate in his current setting. He explained how his schooling in Lebanon was essentially devoid of elements we consider as given here in Canada.

My interview experience with Enzo has not changed my research interest or purposes. It has, however, changed the way I will think about developing my interview questions for other students. After viewing the drawings in advance of the interview, I constructed 25 questions, but many of the questions were not asked because the interview took on an unpredictable life of its own. I came to the understanding that I must pose broader questions so as to allow my participants to navigate through their own personal histories, in their own time. I now know that I don’t need 25 questions; perhaps I only need four or five questions that will nourish dialogue, rather than quickly “steer it” in the direction I desire.

### **Researching mathematics teachers’ experience of assessment and grading**

Richelle Marynowski wrote the following account about the re-framing of her research interest in response to a first interview she conducted. Her beginning research interest was in how mathematics teachers use assessments to create grades for students. With her previous roles and responsibilities/involvements with mathematics assessment at the provincial level, Marynowski understood the importance that has been placed on mathematics grades by students, teachers and parents. To field test her interview, Marynowski worked with a teacher she already knew as a friend.

In my interview with a high school mathematics teacher, Simone, I was interested in how she used assessments in her class to create grades for students. I wanted to learn how she understood the meaning of grades and how she saw her assessments as reflecting the students’ understanding of

the content of the course. In the interview I also endeavored to use open-ended questions that could help me acquire a more holistic appreciation of Simone as a mathematics teacher and as a person.

I used or adapted the 27 narrative inquiry questions suggested by Ellis (2006). I reworded some of the questions so that they were focused on mathematics teaching. For example, I changed the question, “What’s the most difficult thing you have ever had to do or is there something you’ve done that was really hard to do but you really wanted to do it?” to “What’s the most difficult thing you have ever had to do as a teacher or is there something you’ve done that was really hard to do but you really wanted to do it?” I left other questions as they were because I couldn’t see how to relate them to mathematics teaching. Examples of these questions were:

- If you had to go to work only three days a week, what are some of the things you’d like to do with the extra time?
- What would you like to be really good at doing?
- Do you ever get other people to go along with your ideas?
- In all of the things you are interested in or have spent time thinking about, what has puzzled you the most?
- In the world of nature or in the world of things or in the world of people, what is it that surprises you the most, or that you find the most fascinating?

Because I already knew Simone, I was surprised to learn much more about her as a person through the interview. Her responses to many of the open-ended questions repeatedly emphasized her strong spiritual side, her desire to be an even better mother and wife, and her interest in learning more in physics. These interests were repeated and pulled together when she replied to the question, “If you could spend two weeks with someone who does a special kind of work what kind of person would that be?” Simone responded:

... with a really... fantastic mother to see what they do to learn ideas,... or with... two weeks with... just someone who’s really in touch... with their spirituality and just kinda spend two weeks on a retreat somewhere with them or two weeks with an astrophysicist and see what they actually do.

From Simone’s interview responses I also learned much about her interests, experiences, and confidence with mathematics teaching. For example, when asked about daydreams she said “probably my daydream with my teaching is just having more time to plan and to just make better activities, more meaningful activities for my students so that’s probably my daydream is just to have all this time that I can just spend coming up with amazing things for things for my students.” When asked whether she ever gets other people to go along with her ideas, Simone laughed and said “yes” and told a story about getting everyone in her department to start using one of her activities with all of the Grade 10 mathematics classes. When asked, “What’s the most difficult thing you have ever had to do as a teacher?”, Simone stated “Every time I have to fail a student... I hate that (whispered).” In further discussion Simone clarified her view that students’ failures relate “to work ethic and things like that; not intelligence level at all.” Simone also commented that she feels a failing grade is “hard on most students because they feel they are not good enough.”

As I reflected on Simone’s capabilities and interests as a mathematics teacher, and especially her views and feelings about the dynamics of students failing, I began to consider questions about teacher professional identity – how is a teacher’s professional identity developed and negotiated in a culture of assessment and accountability? I also wondered whether other mathematics teachers perceive their students’ performance as a reflection of their teaching or as a reflection of the students. Thus, my research interests shifted from questions about “how assessments are used in mathematics classes to create grades for students” to questions about “teachers’ thoughts about the

meaning of grades and whether these reflect students' understandings" and "how a teacher's professional identity is developed and negotiated in a culture of assessment and accountability." Although my use of open-ended questions did not give me what I thought I wanted in the interview, Simone's responses provoked wonderings that intrigued me more than what I had initially planned on discovering.

## Discussion

The accounts of the interviews illustrate different ways that the use of pre-interview activities or open-ended questions contributed to holistic understanding of participants' experiences of the research topics. In Janjic-Watrich's interview with Sam, she immediately learned central themes in his experience with reading through his reflective response to the pre-interview activity. He provided the two metaphors, *Reading inside of school is like "knives stabbing your throat."* *Reading outside of school is like "an imaginary escape where you won't be harmed."* With awareness of these key ideas Janjic-Watrich was able to modify her prepared questions to ensure that they were meaningful and would create good openings for Sam to tell stories about his experience.

In Macris's interview with Enzo, the pre-interview drawings he prepared to show his life before and after coming to Canada served as a visual context to support him in telling his stories in the ways in which he needed. With the drawings as the centerpiece of the interview he was comfortable in taking the lead to tell the stories he wanted and in the order he wanted. Macris sensed that as Enzo pursued his story telling with all the twists and turns in topics he was searching for the meaning of these experiences. Importantly, with the drawings as a visual focal point to anchor the wide-ranging talk and stories, Macris was able to resist any inclinations to force the interview into a question and answer session. Instead she responded to his drawings and stories and a genuine dialogue developed.

In Marynowski's interview with Simone, a mathematics teacher, she used open-ended questions about Simone's life in general and about her experience of teaching mathematics. In hearing Simone's stories and comments Marynowski noticed recurring themes regarding interests, motivations, and capabilities. Anything Simone did she wanted to do well or better: being a good mother and wife; deepening her spirituality; learning more about her interest area of physics; developing amazing things for her students to do in mathematics classes. Learning about Simone's accomplishments, motivations, and frustrations in mathematics teaching supported a whole-part understanding of Simone's beliefs about assessment in connection with her grading practices.

The learning that each of the researchers experienced in the interviews prompted changes in their research plans. Janjic-Watrich shifted her aliteracy question from being a "why" question to being a "what" question, that is, what are the in and out of school experiences of students who choose to opt in or opt out reading? Macris changed her ideas about the kinds of interview questions that will be needed, that is, not 25 questions but only four or five that will nourish dialogue rather than steer it in directions of interest to her. After Marynowski had the opportunity to appreciate the many whole-part relationships of which Simone was comprised both as a person and as a mathematics teacher, she turned her attention to teacher identity and planned to ask part-whole relationship questions about teacher professional identity in a culture of assessment and accountability.

As researchers contemplate anticipated studies and work to develop data collection plans, their research questions or purposes can sometimes feel either too broad or too narrow. The exploratory first interview approach described and illustrated in this article may be a helpful way to refine research plans or questions and ensure good use of resources and valuable findings in studies

pertaining to classroom issues or practices.

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