
Exploring the Use of Interviews when Designing for Empowerment

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Abstract

This paper attempts to highlight the value of traditional methods, such as interviews, when designing with and for teenagers. This argumentation presents the case for interviews in situations where we are aiming to support teenagers as they take steps toward adulthood and reflects upon this in the context of a study that explored the design of digital technologies that sought to facilitate the empowerment of disenfranchised teenagers within a specific community. It suggests that the treatment of teenage participants as equal to adult participants greatly strengthened their involvement in the design process. While it is of undoubted importance to uncover new and increasingly effective methods when working with teenagers, we should not be too quick to discount traditional methods such as interviews.

Author Keywords

Design; methods; teenagers; interviews; trust

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI); Miscellaneous.

Introduction

The type of methodology chosen for a given project is dependent upon the context within which the work is

occurring, the aims of the research, and the participants involved. This case study reports upon a participatory design project that occurred in a community in Lancaster, England and sought to explore the barriers preventing the empowerment of young people and how digital technologies could support them to engage in local decision-making and planning. Empowering young people to engage in community decision-making and planning can potentially act as an important component of their development of agency. Which is imperative to the mental wellbeing of teenagers as they seek to transition to adulthood [3]. Yet, teenagers often feel unable to engage in such activities, meaning important developmental milestones are missed. The barriers affecting empowerment within a community are likely to have been erected because of the previous interactions of younger and older members of the community. As group interviews provide the potential to explore shared understandings of a phenomena [2], they were adopted within the present study. This methodological decision allowed community members to overcome their mutual distrust of each others likely participation in the design process and identify the factors that were hindering the empowerment of young people within the community. While interviews remain far from novel methods in design, the contribution of this case study is to suggest that they ought not to be overlooked as we seek new methods to interact with teenagers. In situations where we aim to convey responsibility or trust, such as in youth empowerment, the potential of interview techniques to treat teenagers in a manner similar to how adults would be treated remains invaluable.

Background

This project sought to understand how digital technologies might be able to facilitate the development of agency by empowering young people to act within their communities. It occurred in a community with a reputation for experiencing disadvantage and which has a high proportion of teenagers not in education, employment, or training (NEET). The project required the participation of both teenage (n = 6; age range = 17-18) and adult (n = 6; age range = 31-62) community members to identify the barriers that may be hampering teenage participation in such situations. The primary challenge in this work was to understand why the young community members were not actively involved in the decision-making and planning within their community and how this could be overcome. It aimed to help them become active within their community and engage in planning, organising, and decision-making in such complicated settings to aid their development of agency. Thus, the requirements of this were multidimensional. The primary requirement was that it would support young people to take responsibility to address important issues within their community and allow the adult community members to pass responsibility on to younger community members for these issues. An additional requirement was that the system had to be seamlessly integrated within community life. Empowering young people to engage with local decision-making and planning is already fraught with difficulties. Adding further complications through an ill-designed system that is at odds with community life would have immediately made it ineffective. Finally, from a technical standpoint, any design had to be relatively simple and easy-to-use because of literature demonstrating the negative

perceptions of technology often held by older people [4]. While the latter requirements compliment one another, in that a simple system will be more easily integrated into the community than a complicated system, the former requirement provided a major challenge to the design process. However, this challenge informed the use of ethnographic methods, group interviews, as they allow for a deeper, shared negotiation of a problem that is aware of the perspectives of all participants [2].

The Use of Interviews

Interviews are a widely used research technique within the social sciences and are considered particularly effective at uncovering understandings of specific phenomena that resist easy interpretation [1]. They have also been shown to be effective with teenagers for their potential to engage participants in reflection upon their own experiences and in the construction of new meanings [5]. For example, studies [e.g. 6] have found that, in therapeutic settings, teenage children whose parent suffers from alcoholism go through four distinct stages: dwelling on previous negative memories, reflecting on opportunities missed because of their parent's alcoholism, exploring the daily struggle between their thoughts and feelings and how these impact their behaviour, before finally creating a new understanding of their situation where they recognise their current responsibilities and understand their pasts. In other words, the interview process helped them come to terms with their pasts and better understand the factors that are currently affecting them and how they can act to address these factors. However, one major issue, which was symptomatic of the wider problem within the community, and made the use of interviews challenging was that the adult community

members did not trust the younger community members to engage honestly and thoroughly with the interview process nor did they expect them to contribute anything of value. On the other hand, the younger community members did not expect that adults would listen to their viewpoint.

Overcoming an Absence of Trust through Interviews

This problem was overcome by the use of focus group interviews involving both the adults and the teenagers. [2] suggest that the group interview enables the negotiation of a more thorough understanding through group input of a problem. Therefore, to identify the issues that are undermining attempts to empower young people within the community and to explore how these could be overcome, both teenagers and adults had to contribute together. This interaction proved surprising for many of the adults, with some remarking that they were impressed with the participation young people to engage in the design process and that their trust towards the younger community members had grown. Similarly, the teenage participants were impressed that they were surprised at how open to accepting and integrating their ideas the adult community members were. The contribution of this work is to emphasise the potential value of interviews in certain situations when designing with and for teenagers. Yet, this is context dependent. This work sought to enable young people to take responsibility and engage in local decision-making and planning and support adults to pass that responsibility on to young people. Consequently, interviews were ideally suited to this as they provided a level playing field for the shared discussion and interaction between community

members to explore the factors causing an existing community issue.

Conclusion

This case study reports upon the use of group interviews in a design project involving teenagers that sought to address the barriers that might be impacting upon the empowerment of younger community members. Interviews were the method of choice to engage with the teenagers because of the importance of exploring a shared group perspective while also treating adults and younger community members as equally powerful during the design process. During the course of the project, improvements in trust between the younger and older community members were noted, such that older community members found themselves to trust the teenagers more once they witnessed their participation in the process. Similarly, the teenagers trusted the adults more as they once they saw that their opinions and ideas were valued. The contribution of this case study is to highlight the potential utility of interviews as methods to work with teenagers and suggests that, depending upon context, we ought not overlook their potential value as we seek ever newer methods.

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