

Uncovering tacit knowledge: Digital tools and the discourse-based interview (DBI)

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Supplementary resources and more about our study at dtext.org/transfer/

Abstract

Lee Odell, Dixie Goswami, & Anne Herrington (1983) created the discourse-based interview (DBI) to explore tacit knowledge: the practical, implicit, incompletely articulated knowledge which guides writing choices (Polyani, 1958), often as values shared among communities (Swales, 2004). Writing researchers engage DBIs by reviewing relevant texts to identify important writing choices, then asking participants to consider and discuss alternatives. Our review of recent scholarship employing the DBI has revealed a range of approaches to developing questions and conducting interviews, many using technology not available in 1983: screencasting (Swartz, 2009); electronic comparisons of texts (Olinger, 2014); and computer-based corpus linguistics (Lancaster, 2016). Thirty-five years after Odell, Goswami, & Herrington wrote, we ask: how has the DBI changed? How and why it is still widely used? What is its future? How can digital tools improve its accuracy and effectiveness?

In this poster presentation, we share methods for conducting DBIs which engage digital tools in question formation, to stimulate recall in participants, or to facilitate data collection and/or analysis. We present relevant changes in thinking about tacit knowledge, offer concrete examples of tools used for DBIs, and map other parts of this methodological project.

Key source

Odell, Lee; Goswami, Dixie; and Herrington, Anne. (1983). The discourse-based interview: A procedure for exploring the tacit knowledge of writers in nonacademic settings. In P. Mosenthal, L. Tamor, & S. A. Walmsley (eds), *Research on Writing* (pp. 221-236). New York: Longman.

Our methods

We analyzed 10 articles and 10 dissertations which use discourse-based interviews, as suggested from a Google Scholar citation search, developing a list of codes which will be used in a more extensive future analysis.

1. Definition of tacit knowledge
2. Explicitly articulated methodological concerns
3. Methods used for forming questions asked in DBI itself
4. Media or technologies as object of study, and/or used to stimulate recall
5. Engagement with time in methods
6. Types of interviews
7. Duration of interviews
8. Scholarly lineage or influence (mentors, cited sources, etc.)

Findings

1. We found considerable variation in DBI methods, with some researchers moving far from the original intent (interviews about writers' own texts intended to explore writing knowledge).
2. Digital tools are being used more often to enhance DBIs, in both supporting question formation and recording interviews themselves. Digital texts are also more often studied.

Implications

1. Extensions of the DBI via digital tools are productive, but the underlying methodology of tacit knowledge needs to be updated given recent work—not only sources in writing studies mentioned on our poster, but also from philosophy and psychology.
2. Some of the digital tools engaged by researchers are labor intensive (the use of video) and/or require specialized disciplinary knowledge (corpus linguistics). Engaging digital tools doesn't always make things simpler.
3. Researchers need to systematically explore the methodological limitations of digital tools.

Future work

1. Expand analysis by adding more studies that use DBIs, by searching for researchers who use DBI-like approaches without citing Odell, Goswami, & Herrington, and through more extensive coding of researchers' methods & methodology (validating and updating our coding scheme if suggested by a larger corpus of sources).
2. Interview scholars who've modified DBI procedures via digital tools to understand their motivations, evaluate the success of their methods, and explore generalization of the lessons they've learned (perhaps via a special issue of a journal).
3. Many researchers are introduced to the DBI by their mentors. We want to investigate any impacts of "lineage" DBI methods using citation network analysis and by interviewing researchers and the mentors who introduced the DBI to them.

Selected references

For more references and a list of the sources in our analysis, please see our web site (dtext.org/transfer/).

Anson, C. M., & Schwegler, R. A. (2012). Tracking the mind's eye: A new technology for researching twenty-first-century writing and reading processes. *College Composition and Communication*, 64(1), 151–171.

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Swarts, J. (2010). Recycled writing: Assembling actor networks from reusable content. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 24(2), 127–163. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651909353307>

Odell, L., & Goswami, D. (1982). Writing in a non-academic setting. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 16(3), 201-223.