

Using Chat Tools to Perform Evaluation Interviews

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Abstract

To assess the administrative complexity of mobility for non-European students moving throughout Europe on the ERASMUS MUNDUS Network and E-business Centred Computing (NeBCC) program an extensive evaluation study is being undertaken throughout the period of student mobility. This evaluation is undertaken in a mixed mode with students completing a series of online surveys and participating in group interviews at each location they are studying at. To maximize the quantity and quality of the feedback that is given the interviews are strictly confidential and are conducted by a researcher who is non operational in the programme to reduce the problems associated with an unequal power balance. This allows the students to open up to a greater degree and share their feedback and their experiences. Other factors which may also effect how freely a student participates in the interview include the effect of the physical environment and the students own assumptions of that environment.

Suler(2004) identifies the online disinhibition effect where people feel more uninhibited and thereby are willing to speak openly and share information more freely when communicating virtually using online tools, such as chat tools, than they are in a face to face situation. Six factors have been identified as reasons for this effect including the inherent minimization of authority associated with online communication as well as invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative anonymity and dissociative imagination.

This paper considers the phenomena of online disinhibition and outlines some research being undertaken in order to exploit this phenomena by interviewing students in an online environment in an attempt to improve the results of the quality control measures on the NeBCC program. The suitability of using online chat tools to perform interviews is discussed with reference to the limitations of face to face interviewing techniques and the methodology and early results of this research are highlighted.

Keywords

Survey methodology, Quality assurance projects, Online disinhibition, Interview techniques, Mobility

1. Introduction

The NeBCC degree is coordinated within the ACET Centre at the University of Reading (UoR) and is a joint degree run in conjunction with Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

(AUP) and University Carlos III Madrid (UC3M). The program is a mobility scheme and students study for a total of eighteen months taking 4 modules at each of the partner universities, and a further 24 week research project based at one of the partner institutions. The students on this programme are solely responsible for arranging their mobility throughout Europe with the coordinators at each location providing support where necessary. Only a limited number of students enrolled on this programme originate from within Europe with the majority of students coming from “third countries” which adds significant complexity to their mobility in terms of administrative requirements which must be addressed if the student is to complete the course. The program is in its second iteration with the first intake of students having just completed their research project. The second intake of students has just completed their studies at the second location and is in the process of mobility to location three. Applications for the third intake of students have just been processed.

In order to raise the visibility of issues associated with the complex nature of the student experience on this program and also the unique problems associated in terms of maintaining academic uniformity and administrative coherence at a program wide level self-evaluation is a mandatory consideration. Self evaluation allows feedback to be given to the managing partners involved in the degree which can be used to drive the evolutionary changes essential for this new form of academic collaboration. The ACET centre has a rigorous Quality Assurance Programme (QAP) coordinated by researcher’s independent to the teaching and day to day activities on the program. The QAP was launched informally shortly after the first period of mobility for the first intake of students and has since been integrated into the formal regulatory processes on the program All aspects of the program and the students experiences are evaluated by an extensive surveying program and in-depth interviews with the students and professors. Evaluation of the students’ experience involves a series of confidential surveys and group interviews at each location. Each survey consists of questions regarding the nature of mobility, the content of the course, the use of technology on the course and the effectiveness of the organizational infrastructure. An important factor to effective interviewing is that of building trust and open communication between the interviewer and interviewee. In order to achieve this goal the interviewer was always the same person, a student and presented as a “voice” for the student body.

2. QAP Round One

The first round of the QAP resulted in various initiatives being undertaken within the program relating to improving particularly the visibility of student issues and the student experience. These initiatives include implementing a class representative as well as mentoring schemes and the formalisation of the Quality Assurance Project. Another initiative was the enabling of an online community as a channel of communication between the students raising the visibility of student issues throughout the student body and allowing students to engage in collaborative problem solving. It is also used to raise the visibility of student issues to the administrators and management teams by the use of a “Contact the administrators” board as well as high level analysis of posting activity. Students are invited to join the community as soon as they are accepted on the programme. The technology enabling the community is open source and is an integrated solution based on the phpBB bulletin board software and the phpmychat chat server. Students have access to the community on acceptance to the course and use the chat server for synchronous chat sessions with key faculty members as well as with students from previous intakes as a means to solicit advice and information about the

program. Use of the community continues throughout the student's registration on the course and student access is never revoked.

The interviews undertaken with the first intake of students took place in an office setting set aside specifically for that purpose. On completion of these interviews it was observed that the same information was often being given repeatedly and consideration was given to the technique being used to gain feedback in terms of the cost (both time and financial) the mobility of the interviewer and the quality and quantities of new feedback that was being generated. Of particular concern was the fact that considerable effort was being made to get the feedback and on the whole after interviewing a sample of the class (approximately 50%) little new or relevant information was being given. Analysis of the feedback that was given highlighted the fact that students typically were comfortable answering factual questions, but less comfortable answering speculative or personal questions.

Other problems included the issues associated with the physical environment that the students were being interviewed in and their perceptions of this environment. The simple presence of a Dictaphone and a desk and the fact that the interviews were being conducted within the university buildings by someone that the university has commissioned to conduct the research inherently reduces the camaraderie and the implication that the researcher was on the student "side" striving for information pertaining to the students situation in order to improve their situation. The presence of these physical cues inherently establishes a power imbalance and gives the impression of an authority figure. The fact that the students are called by the course coordinators to be in a certain place at a certain time to partake in an interview creates a formality and authority to the proceedings. All of these factors could be an inhibitor to free speech and the building of trust.

The following techniques were considered and rejected as alternative solutions in order to address these issues:

Performing the feedback interviews using AV conferencing tools. AV conferencing, in effect, mimics the interaction that may occur in the face to face environment. Arguably, AV conferencing can be considered a substitute for face to face contact. As the scope of this work is to get an alternative methodology in order to achieve a greater quantity or quality of feedback this option was not considered a relevant solution. Furthermore, one of the major issues highlighted by the students on the program is the lack of reliable internet connectivity at their accommodation and also, in one location the lab. The technical complications of implementing AV conferencing made this option a consideration for a future project.

Interviewing a sample of the class Another possibility was that of only interviewing a sample of the class and accepting the feedback given as representative of the class's experiences. While a highly practical alternative it was considered that part of the success of the evaluation program rests on the relationship with the researchers and the fact that the students feel that their voice is listened to and their opinion counts. In fact, in one survey a student suggested the evaluation program be improved by "*reducing the number of guys in each group.....*" in order to allow for more time to be spent giving their feedback. Performing the evaluation interviews on only half of the class undermines the sense that the feedback is valuable and would give the students the impression that a process is being completed, one which is less about their opinion and more about completing some policy requirements. Also, although little or no new feedback is given once the whole class has been interviewed sometimes the occasional interesting piece of new feedback is given and this opportunity

should not be missed. Finally, this methodology does nothing to improve the issues associated with formality and authority.

3. Chat tools and the online disinhibition effect

The solution decided upon was to use the chat server on the NeBCC community as a means to ensure that the students are all given the chance to give feedback in all areas and reduce the issues relating to formality and authority. As the community is an existing community it affords the opportunity to exploit the existing technology as well as the community spirit and relationships that already exist. Furthermore, the online disinhibition effect proposed by Suler in 2004 highlights the possibility of students responding to the interviews differently and the potential that more or new feedback could be generated.

The basic premise of the online disinhibition effect is the fact that text chat is a form of social lubricant. People often act in a different manner than they would in a face to face environment with mixed results. In its most positive or benign form people are able to communicate problems or issues they are facing more freely, un-inhibited by the physical nature of presence. In its most negative or toxic form people can feel more inclined to act or react in an inappropriate or un-proportionate manner, responding angrily or violently, often at odds with how they would react in the “real” or physical world. Analysis of the community postings on the online NeBCC community show, to date, no examples of toxic disinhibition in the community and the culture of the community is one of open and honest information exchange. The methodology proposed in this paper attempts to harness benign disinhibition by performing interviews online using the community chat tool in order to obtain a new or different perspective on the students experience on the program.

Suler (2004) identified the following reasons for altered behaviour in the online environment

Dissociative anonymity (you don't know me) – this characteristic relates to the fact that the chatter feels the disinhibitive effect of anonymity and thereby feels free to respond more openly or out of character. This relates partially to the scenario developed in this paper as although the students know and have a relationship via the community with the researcher conducting the evaluation this relationship was formed in the first instance via the online community when the students did not know the researcher and the online relationship has developed from that point.

Invisibility (You can't see me) - This attribute is relevant in this experiment as not only are the students physically separate from the possible perceived source of authority, in this case the researcher, they were also in some cases separate from each other.

Asynchronicity (See you later) – this is a particularly relevant factor for this experiment. The fact that the interviewer and the students are not all co-located means this could be a potential source of disinhibition.

Solipsistic Introjection (It's all in my head) – this phenomena details the similarity between the conversations that one may have in ones own head with the conversations one would have using text chat. Much as with internal dialogue one may assign a character, appearance and personality to perceived persona in an online environment and then act accordingly based on these assumptions. This phenomenon is extremely relevant in terms of this research when considering the relationship the students had prior to arrival on the course with the researcher undertaking the interviews. On the first face to face meeting

with the interviewer four separate students expressed surprise when they realised that the researcher who had been communicating online with them was female, despite the researcher having what is a commonly recognised female name and a female avatar, having taken the assumption that the researcher involved would be male. Despite a prior three month virtual relationship this assumption was somehow never revoked indicating that the process the students were experiencing was internal in nature, formed within their own imaginations. Pre-defined assumptions were made sometimes ignoring obvious external prompts from the real world and virtual world. Much the same as one would with an internal dialogue one feels free to speak in ways one would never consider in the real “physical” world and one becomes emboldened to speak freely.

Dissociative imagination (It’s just a game) – a relevant attribute for this work this characteristic looks at the process where ones online persona and world is distinct from that in the real world. The responsibilities or repercussions of actions online are not given the same consideration as the person would give in the physical world.

Minimizing authority (we are equals) – possibly the most fundamental possible advantage of this method of interviewing is the possibility of the minimization of sense of authority. By removing the physical environment and its cues, the physical presence of the researcher and the formal arrangement of the interview allows for the impression of equality. This is especially true when considering in the first place the relationship between the researcher and the students was fostered in an online environment as one student assisting them then this minimisation of authority is particularly relevant.

4. Methodology applied

A traditional interview script was developed based on the scripts used in previous years and previous projects undertaken within the ACET centre. Questions were divided into topics and the topics categorised based on how much feedback was anticipated. These topics were then allocated a rating hot, neutral or cold based on discussion with the coordinators of the course, analysis of the online community posting and viewing history, and consideration of the interviews that were undertaken in the previous year. The hot topics were the topics that were deemed to be the most controversial or problematic thereby being the most likely to generate the highest amount of feedback. The topics for consideration were:

Administrative Issues - These questions allowed students to give details of their administrative experiences on the course. Of particular relevance were questions pertaining to the student’s accommodation, VISA application process, financial arrangements and the administrative support that they had received to date. Due to the fact that the students are required to satisfy a tough set of requirements to ensure their place on the course and that failure to satisfy these requirements would result in losing their place on the course it was anticipated that this would be one of the hot topics of discussion.

Teaching and Learning - These questions related to the actual academic content and standards of teaching across the course. In general the students registered on the course are highly motivated in their studies and are very keen to discuss their progression throughout the course, their opinion of the professors and academic quality at each location. Due to these facts this topic was allocated also a hot rating.

Mobility - Moving from one location to another has its own burdens associated with it from the issues associated with physical mobility, for example the arranging of transportation of self and belongings, to the financial implications of mobility. In previous years this topic was of interest and did receive a reasonable amount of feedback but was not one of the topics the students were particularly passionate about discussing. Based on this mobility was given a neutral rating.

Culture - This program is particularly unusual in that the students are exposed to a rich cultural diversity not only within the class room but also within their living environment as they move from country to country. The issues surrounding this topic include the problems associated with the languages and cultural norms of each location as well as their own expectations of perceptions based on their own cultural background and upbringing. While this topic did receive some interesting feedback in the previous intake it was not one of the problematic areas thereby it received a neutral rating.

Use of technology - The program is technology managed and this topic addresses the use of the Blackboard LMS on the program from the functionality offered by the tool to how it was used in the different locations. While this topic was of interest to the administrative and management teams this was not a topic of great interest to the students in previous intakes. As a result this topic received cold rating.

The ERASMUS MUNDUS community - This topic related not only to the use of the online community but also to the dynamic of the class and bonds that were formed. Given that the students work very closely together on academic projects and also often live together, the pressured environment that they are in is an important factor for consideration and it is essential that the classroom dynamic is a positive and healthy one for the well being of the group as a whole. In the previous intake the students were particularly reluctant to discuss the classroom dynamic and give any anecdotal information about the group dynamic or cohesiveness. Therefore this topic received a cold rating.

The students were divided into 6 groups based on a number of variables. The first variable for consideration was their online posting history on the NeBCC community. Consideration was given to the number of posts on the NeBCC community with the top 6 posters being randomly assigned a position in each of the groups. The bottom 6 posters were allocated a group at random. The reason for this initial categorisation was to minimise the confounding effect of their usual online behaviour and reduce the possibility of having one group of students reluctant to communicate online and another group of particularly keen students. The remaining 15 students were then categorised by the course coordinators based on their face to face experiences with the students. They were categorised into two categories: familiar and non familiar. The reason for this category is that based on previous experiences some students were comfortable making comments and complaints online but not face to face. One particular incidence of this is one of the high profile members of the online community who was one of the most prolific and occasionally over zealous posters but was virtually unknown by administrative staff not involved with the online community. The remaining students were randomly assigned to a group.

The interview scripts were then divided into two scripts with each script containing One hot, two neutral and one cold topic. The two neutral topics were asked to every group to act as a controlling group for the questions as a basis for comparison of how well balanced the groups were. The scripts created were as follows

Script A :Administration, Mobility and Culture, The use of technology

Script B: Teaching and learning, Mobility and Culture, The EM community

The six groups generated were then classified into Group A or Group B. The students allocated to Group A received interview script A in the formal face to face interview, the students in Group B received interview script B in the formal face to face interview. For the online interviews this scenario was reversed with each group receiving the script of questions they had not been given in the face to face interviews.

4.1 Analysis Methodology

There are two stages which will be undertaken in the analysis of the data generated from this project. This paper will report the early results (those entitled phase one). The results of the second phase of analysis are out of the scope of this paper.

4.1.1 Phase one

This phase involves two stages

High level review of the content and tone of the online interview by using the chat scripts and audio files generated throughout the process to generate a report for the management committee Based on the process of generating the report, which is one of the main objectives of conducting the interviews in the first instance, some initial comments and observations can be made into the feedback generated by both methodologies and the usefulness of the comments generated.

Implementation of a survey to get initial feedback from the students on their feelings about being asked for their feedback face to face and online.

The survey given to the students started with a section relating to the group they were placed in and to obtain an opinion of their perception of the evaluation process in general. The survey then went on to ask some high level closed questions about the nature of the online and face to face interviews in terms of the level of formality, constructiveness, administration of the interview, level of comfort with the format of the interview and the relevance of the questions. Students were then asked to identify their preferred method of interview and some reasons for this selection. Finally students were asked to give some open ended feedback about the face to face interview, the online interview, the feedback process in general and the content of the feedback left by their group. All closed questions were 5 point likert scale questions where students were asked to state, in their opinion, how strongly they agreed with a set of statements with the options of Strongly Agree, Agree, Partially agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree.

Based on this a comparison of the students perception and experiences of the interviews face to face and online and an initial assessment of the usefulness of the two methodologies can be gained.

4.1.2 Phase two (in progress)

This phase involves a full transcription of the face to face interviews and codifying of the results using a standard CAQDAS tool yet to be decided. Feedback will be categorised by topic and then classified as

Factual – information about concrete facts and events

Speculative – information offered which is not factual but is based on opinion or supposition

Personal – personal information relating solely to the respondent and their circumstances or opinions

An analysis of the number of responses made by each group in the control questions will be made to ensure the validity of the groups and further comparative analysis into the quantity and quality of the feedback that was left using both methodologies will be made. Based on this analysis final conclusions will be able to be drawn as to whether online interviewing can be used as an effective tool and scenario based recommendations can be made for the use of online interviewing techniques for evaluation of academic programs.

5. Results

At the highest level of analysis the presence of some form of online disinhibition is evident. The tone of the feedback appeared much more informal and personal and students seemed to be more confident in expressing their personal opinions and making observations about their class mates. Examples of comments that illustrate this:

On discussing the timekeeping of the other members of the group:

“it is bad the way our guys conduct themselves”

In the face to face interviews there has only previously ever been one direct criticism of another class member and the issues surrounding this criticism were very serious. Other than that the students effectively closed ranks in the face to face interviews and, while happy to make critical observations about the course and the professors, never made reference to any internal disagreements or misgivings.

On discussing the class representative:

“i think it was a good idea and we had a switched on guy”

In the face to face interviews the students were happy to discuss the validity of having a class rep and improvements that could be made in terms of the administration of this initiative and extra support required. Again there was a reluctance to actually discuss how the current elected candidate was getting on personally.

On discussing the amount of administrative support given throughout the program

“its only that some of our guys want spoon feeding when they can do some things themselves”

In the face to face interviews there was a sense of collective dissatisfaction about certain administrative issues and the degree of support given over some of the issues regarding obtaining VISA's and accommodation. At no point in the face to face interviews was there any discussion that there were any other issues other than a failure on behalf of the administrators.

On discussing the teaching staff on the course

“Databases was good...we had a good teacher and a handsome one.....all the girls really paid attention in this class....”

This comment was completely at odds with the formal tone found in the face to face interviews and highlights the disinhibiting effects identified by Suler.

5.1 Results from the survey

In general the results from the survey are mixed. The students expressed a direct preference for the face to face interviews with 73.33% citing face to face interviews as their preferred methodology. Reasons given for this included

“Because it’s more comfortable to discuss like a conversation”

“Because its easier to express what you mean....English is not my native language”

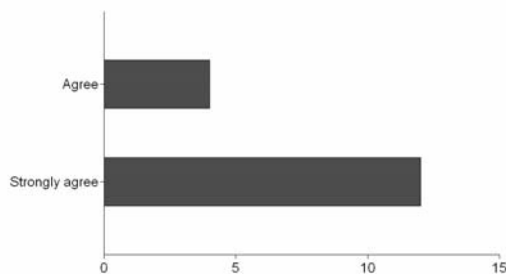
“Easier to know whether the interviewer is interested in us or not”

Reasons given by the respondents who selected a preference for the online interviews included

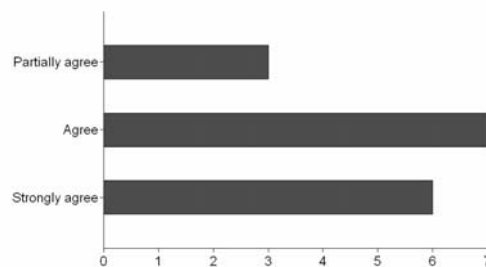
“I prefer online chatting”

“Ease of making your point of view and the ability to refer to what has already been said in order to make further contributions”

Before considering the effectiveness of the method of evaluation consideration was given to the interviewer/interviewee relationship and the group cohesiveness of the groups the students were assigned to in order to rule out any secondary factors which may have confused the results of the survey. Students were asked some questions to assure that they understood that the interview process was confidential and to establish that they trusted and felt comfortable with the interviewer.



I felt comfortable with the interviewer confidential



I trust that the feedback I give is confidential

94% of respondents felt comfortable speaking out in groups and 94% also felt comfortable speaking in the groups they were assigned to. In general the group cohesiveness was high with the students usually agreeing with the feedback given by their group and feeling that the feedback was relevant and constructive

Overall the students felt they were given the opportunity to express their own opinions and that their group did not complain unreasonably. No significant issues were raised by any of the groups with regard to the group that they had been put into or the content of the feedback left by their group.

The students were then asked to consider, in separate sections, their face to face interview and their online interview. The results for both methodologies were fairly consistent with students feeling they were able to give all the feedback that they wanted using either

methodology, that the degree of group cohesiveness was unaffected by the methodology of interview, that the questions asked were relevant, interviews were well organised and most students in both cases felt the feedback given would be taken seriously. The three main areas where differences were perceived by the students were in the formality of the interview, how comfortable the students felt with that mode as a way of giving feedback and with how constructive the interviews were.

All students responded that they felt comfortable giving their feedback in the face to face interview but some of the students were less sure of giving feedback in the online environment with approximately 31% of respondents only partially agreeing with the statement "*I feel comfortable giving my feedback in the online environment*". The majority of respondents felt the face to face interviews were formal with only 14% of respondents disagreeing with the statement that "*the face to face interview was formal*", 29% partially agreed with this statement and the remaining respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. However, for the online interviews only 38% of respondents Agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "*the online interviews were formal*" with 39% only partially agreeing and the remaining respondents disagreeing with this statement. This is a significant result in terms of defining that the students felt the online interviews were less formal than the face to face interviews. This fact is supported by the evidence that most online interviews ran late due to lateness of the students. In the face to face interviews the students were all in the appointed place at the appointed time. With the lack of formality associated with this mode of interviewing came also a casual approach to the process which caused some problems in terms of administrating the interviews but also is a potential reason the students felt more comfortable to give personal or speculative feedback.

All respondents felt that the feedback given in the face to face interviews were constructive with 31% only partially agreeing with the fact that "*the online interviews were constructive*". This discrepancy could be considered due to the perceived lack of formality of the interviews causing a more casual approach to be taken to the online interviews. Another factor that could have influenced how effective the online interview's was the length of time allocated to them. While 28% of students felt that the face to face interviews should have been longer 46% felt that more time should have been given to the online interviews despite the fact that the same length of time was allocated to both face to face and online interviews.

Finally students were asked if they felt online interviewing was a viable alternative to face to face interviewing in terms of collecting feedback about their experiences. Despite the mixed results 54% felt it was a viable alternative, 23% partially agreed it was a viable alternative and the remaining 23% felt it was inappropriate as an alternative.

6. Conclusions and further work

While the Online disinhibition effect is evident from the chat transcripts more analysis is required in order to identify statistically the degree of impact of this effect in terms of the quality and quantity of feedback given. A comparative analysis evaluation at a personal level as to the profile of students who appeared to be most uninhibited in the online environment with their real world behaviour should also be considered.

There are many reasons why this disinhibition has occurred as identified by Suler and there is evidence to support that the online environment has produced a less formal, fluid environment

where the students feel more comfortable in expressing personal feelings and opinions. However, there were some issues with the constructiveness and duration of these interviews which raises some questions with regard to using online interviews as an alternative to face to face interviews. Based on the early results of this experiment it is recommended that careful thought be given to the appropriateness of using online interviewing techniques and that these techniques should only be considered when the required feedback is supplementary to formal self evaluation processes or the feedback is required is :

References

- Personal – the online environment facilitates the required disinhibition and the respondent appears more willing to share personal information. This would be particularly effective in getting students to self evaluate and reflect on experiences.
- In small, focussed areas of interest – this methodology appears to take more time in order to get all the information required. This methodology would be successfully applied to a small list of questions rather than a large list of varying questions
- However, it is considered that in order to have a complete, rounded understanding of student’s experiences of mobility online interviewing is a necessary activity as it provides an opportunity to get a more personal understanding of the student’s perceptions.
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