Chapter 5
Fieldwork in Business Contexts: Go–Along Interviews

ABSTRACT

Go-along interviews, also known as walk-along interviews, involve interviewers and interviewees moving through an environment that has relevance for the specific interview in question. These types of interviews are useful in many different business contexts. From a communication perspective, this form of interviewing also represents the most extreme form of interviewing practice. The physical environment effectively becomes a participant in the developing interview, shaping the interview by “suggesting” new topics or imposing thematic constraints on the interview. Any transcript reflects this shaping through references to its wider world. From the perspective of communication, the physical environment—natural or built—imposes specific situations with respect to communication that can, in turn, be used to trigger certain factual and narrative canonical genres. These communicative situations link to relevant textual strategies and canonical genres as well as situational information that can be recovered. They also provide engagement practices for go-along interviews and interviewing.

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INTRODUCTION

The chapter describes the use of moving interviews - so-called go-along interviews - from the perspective of the elicitation strategy outlined in the previous chapter. Both moving and static interviews can be accommodated from this perspective. The justification for this chapter is that go-along interviews are being increasingly used to collect valuable information on places and spaces, and the practices associated with them, in many different disciplines. Go-along interviews are usually semi-structured, in-depth interviews, and often involve the standard interviewer-interviewee dyad.

Enacting go-along interviews is less straightforward than conducting static interviews. For example, an interview protocol for a go-along interview will likely need to be more open-ended than is the case for static interviews. In real manufacturing settings, for example, there can be real surprises waiting just around the corner! Interviewing an expert on production processes while touring a physical plant, with its sometimes strange and overwhelming arrangement of facilities and the activities, may suggest questions to the interviewer that could not possibly have been pre-planned in an interview protocol. Manufacturing and production environments, for example, are designed spaces - spaces that exist in order to undertake specific manufacturing and business functions. Moving through them is also not only about creating descriptions of what is obvious and visible, but also revealing the broader organization and reasoning that underpins a larger set of processes around which these spaces have been designed.

The larger processes that constitute the manufacturing environment are often unknown and intangible to the interviewer until they are referred to by the interviewee. They may then be subsequently understood through subsequent elicitation. The interview is necessarily macrogeneric, as are the underlying business processes that a go-along interview should identify and describe. Unfamiliar spatially distributed objects and events whose purposeful higher-level organization is also relatively unfamiliar necessarily places considerable pressure on any interview planning process. Indeed, in some applications, this means that both “planning” and the “interview” itself need to be reconsidered and reorganized. One solution is to distribute the interviewing across several social occasions; two examples are provided of this (Clarke & Brown, 2013; Oliver, 2016).

Theorizing interviewing from a communication approach might seem to be especially problematic for go-along interviewing that is necessarily tied

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