

## **Narrative Inquiry using the Long Interview Technique**

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### **Abstract:**

This article outlines why I chose narrative inquiry as my research methodology in exploring the digitalisation gap between small and medium businesses and large enterprises in New Zealand, and how McCracken's Long Interview method facilitated this approach. I also offer some advice for those wanting to pursue a similar research method.

### **Research Background**

Small and medium businesses have persistently lagged in digitalising compared to larger entities (Eller et al., 2020; OECD, 2021). Despite the well-established advantages of digitalisation, little attention has been paid to how small and medium enterprise (SME) owners experience digitalisation (Thrassou et al., 2020). This gap led to my research question: What are the experiences of New Zealand (NZ) SME business owners who have undergone some level of digitalisation? Their experiences shared through their stories, could offer a deeper understanding of the reasons for this digitalisation divide. Given the focus on personal experiences and narratives, I adopted narrative inquiry as the central research methodology.

### **Selecting Narrative Inquiry**

Ramiller and Pentland (2009) argue that the disconnect between research and practice often stems from focusing too narrowly on adoption variables, neglecting the human elements involved in the process. Narrative inquiry is a dynamic and immersive qualitative methodology that revolves around the stories people tell, allowing participants to deeply reflect on their experiences and gain valuable insights. For my research, narrative inquiry offered a robust framework to explore the digitalisation journeys of NZ SME owners, delving into motivations and challenges that influenced their digitalisation decisions—going far beyond mere technology adoption.

### **Narrative Inquiry as a Research Method**

At its core, narrative inquiry uses stories as data, uncovering the underlying narratives that lead to deeper insights (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Kramp, 2004). For instance, in Gertsen and Sørderberg's (2011) study on intercultural business collaboration, narrative inquiry

revealed how different parties formed distinct interpretations of the same event, shedding light on how they worked together toward mutual agreement.

In narrative inquiry, the researcher's role goes beyond simple analysis—it is about digging deeper to uncover the underlying narratives that participants may not even be fully aware of themselves (Riley & Hawe, 2004). These narratives function as mental filters through which people reconstruct and interpret past events, ultimately guiding their future actions (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

### **Data Gathering with McCracken's Long Interview Technique**

Hunter (2012) espouses the use of McCracken's Long Interview method, which balances structure and rigour in the data collection process while still allowing participants the freedom to share their experiences openly. McCracken's (1988) technique divides the interview process into three phases. First, broad "grand tour" questions are asked to prime the participants into the conversation. Ideally, the questions should elicit descriptive answers that will provide jumping points for the next phase of the interview. For my study, the grand tour questions I asked are: *Could you tell me about how you got involved in this business? Could you walk me through the digital tools you have adopted since starting the business?*

As the interview progresses and key information emerges, the "floating prompt" phase whereby follow-up questions are asked to encourage deeper discussion and reflection. Some of the floating prompts I used are: *Could you tell me how you navigated integrating [tool 1] into the business? What did you like about [tool 1]?*

Lastly, "planned prompts" are the remaining questions asked to address specific topics that might not have naturally surfaced during the interview.

### **Challenges in Conducting my Research**

One of the most significant hurdles I faced during my research was securing SME owners who were willing to take time out of their demanding schedules for lengthy, in-depth interviews. After numerous rejections, I tapped into my personal network and managed to arrange interviews with three business owners.

During these interviews, time constraints and trust issues surfaced. Some participants were initially hesitant to share detailed information and required more probing, while others were enthusiastic but wandered into unrelated topics. Active listening and gentle steering were essential to maintain the flow of the conversation while staying on topic. Despite having a list

of questions prepared, I often had to adapt the interview in real-time, ensuring the conversation remained focused without interrupting the participants' natural storytelling process.

### **Advice for Future Researchers**

For researchers considering narrative inquiry using McCracken's Long Interview method, I would like to offer some key lessons from my experience. Firstly, patience and persistence are essential in recruiting participants. Finding participants can be challenging, especially if they have busy schedules.

Secondly, conducting the interviews requires a delicate balance between structure and flexibility. While McCracken's method provides a useful framework, researchers must be willing to allow participants to direct the conversation. Creating a comfortable space where they feel free to share their stories without fear of interruption or being led to specific answers is vital. At the same time, researchers must remain mindful of the overall direction, ensuring the discussion stays aligned with the research objectives. Additionally, allowing time to wind down and end on a lighter note is important, as the process can be mentally draining for participants. Questions that allow space to reflect on the conversation can be used. Some questions I used to wrap up the interviews are: *Any advice for people in similar situations? Are there things in the past you wished you could have done differently? Is there anything else you'd like to share?*

The data analysis phase also proved challenging. The sheer volume of data generated from the interviews required multiple readings and a meticulous coding process to identify recurring themes and patterns across participants. Researchers should be prepared to invest considerable time in coding and interpreting qualitative data. Software such as NVivo can be used to aid in the coding process. However, as my sample size is small, I was advised to do the coding process manually as learning to use it also takes a considerable amount of time.

### **A Rewarding Experience**

In conclusion, the narrative inquiry approach enabled me to capture not only the technical aspects of digital adoption but also the personal, emotional, and socio-economic factors influencing SMEs' digital journeys. Despite the various challenges, the research process proved to be incredibly rewarding. Witnessing SME owners gain new insights into their own digitalisation efforts as they shared their stories added profound meaning to the research.

For future researchers, combining narrative inquiry with McCracken's Long Interview method provides an invaluable tool for delving into complex human experiences. This methodology

offers rich insights that traditional quantitative approaches might overlook, making it an excellent choice for exploring multifaceted issues in depth.

### Short Bio

Denise Selina Tan recently graduated with Master of IT Project Management from AUT. Her research is primarily concerned with the digitalisation experiences of small and medium enterprises in New Zealand.

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