Constructing Questions for Interviews and Questionnaires

Theory and Practice in Social Research

(William Foddy)

My initial attempt to draw information from my target group was by establishing a focus group; this was set up to explore the need for an eLearning resource, its boundaries and to determine some of the resource content. I was conscious that the information I was trying to obtain would in terms of quantity, quality and accuracy be heavily influenced by the nature of the questions the students were asked to respond to in the questionnaire. Consequently I deemed it essential to review important literature on this subject. Foddy makes an important observation “that the use of verbal data has come to dominate the social sciences”, “that asking questions is a widely accepted and cost-efficient way of gathering information about past behaviour and experiences, private actions and motives, and beliefs, values and attitudes”(p 1). Foddy makes a further reflection and an implied wariness of this reliance on verbal data by observing “that increasingly, these verbal reports are limited to expressions of attitudes, feelings, and opinions rather than factual accounts of past behaviour and interactions”. He supports this contention by explaining that sociology is becoming the study of verbally expressed sentiments and feelings, rather than an analysis of human performance.

The author goes on to argue that research has indicated that our ability to construct questions which produce data that are reliable and lead to valid conclusions has not been very impressive to date. This argument is further supported by (Belson. 1986) who concludes that the principal causes of errors in gathering data through the use questionnaires or surveys are (a) the respondent’s failure to understand the intended question; (b) lack of effort or interest on behalf of the respondents; (c) respondents reluctance to admit to certain attitudes or behaviours; (d) the failure of the respondents memory or comprehension processes, if they are under a degree of stress in responding to the questions; (e) interviewer failures, changing the wording from that gathered on the questionnaire, faulty recording procedures, unclear incoherent presentation of the initial questionnaire.
Chapter one provides a worthy insight into some of the main problems that occur when constructing Questions for Interviews and Questionnaires, the former points have helped in clarifying the planning of my questionnaire. Conscientious research, knowledge of the respondent’s literacy skills, familiarity with their awareness of the subject under discussion, will allow for the design of questions that will avoid failure to understand the intended question. With regard to point (b) above, the participants have selected the course by their own choice; therefore there will be a degree of underlying motivation, both out of interest for the content and for obtaining a qualification.

Chapter two discusses some of the important methodological assumptions underpinning past survey work and examines various commonly used models such as the stimulus-response model, describing the use of pre-set response categories and arguing that the use of closed questions has the implication of imposing the researcher’s perceptions upon the respondents. I deliberated over the consequences of this for my focus group questions, and this was one of the factors that helped me decide on an open questioning format.

Another major criticism of qualitative field research was articulated in that qualitative researchers cannot be certain that they have properly recognised the thoughts and perceptions used by respondents, mainly because the steps involved in this type of research are poorly specified and as a result cannot be replicated. This observation had implications for the manner in which I organised and directed the focus group. The moderator read out one question at a time, allowing each participant to answer with their own thoughts and feelings on the subject, there was a predefined sequence which was explained and agreed before the questions started so as to avoid any confusion as to who next would contribute to the question. Two days after this focus group I organised a second focus group using the exact same questions, by replicating this process I wanted to observe if there was any fundamental differences in the answers provided by both groups.

Chapter three discusses the importance of clearly defining the topic under investigation, and informing the audience of this, with this in mind, in the first paragraph of the questionnaire I included a preview of the topic. An interesting issue and of great significance in qualitative research is the open vs. closed question debate, many practical and procedural claims are made by advocates on the two sides, some noteworthy social researchers have taken a
compromise position, Lazarsfield (1944),” suggested that open questions should be used at the initial stages of a project, so that appropriate response categories could be identified for use with closed questions at later stages in the research”.

References:
