

## Interviewing the Interviewers: A Study of the Queensland Speaks Oral History Project<sup>1</sup>

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Queensland Speaks is an ongoing oral history project undertaken by the Centre of The Government of Queensland to record the recollections of former Queensland government ministers and senior public servants. This is the first time a project has sought to record the recollections of both state government ministers and senior public servants on such a scale in Australia. The interviews will be available as audio recordings on the Queensland Speaks website.

The project evolved through a dialogue with the Department of the Premier and Cabinet. The aims of the project were then articulated in the initial ethical clearance documents. These aims include:

- To create a ‘lasting record of the experiences and perspectives’ of former government ministers and former public servants.
- ‘Contribute to the previously neglected area of the study of government and bureaucratic decision making in Queensland.’
- ‘Produce a website which will be an authoritative resource and educational tool’.<sup>2</sup>

This broad goal of continuing the study of Queensland’s recent political history was further fleshed out in an article written by the project’s chief architects. Emeritus Professor Roger Scott and Professor Peter Spearritt, stated in an early paper about the project: “The interview will focus on the respondent’s time in political or public service life in Queensland, with some contextual questions directed to the political climate and policy issues of the time” and that “our primary focus will be on the interface between politicians and public servants in the policy-making process.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank our colleagues for generously giving their time to be interviewed and offer their comments on this article. We would particularly like to thank Professor Peter Spearritt, Emeritus Professor Roger Scott and Dr Marion Stell for reading the early drafts of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Centre for the Government of Queensland, Application Form for *Ethical Clearance for Research Involving Human Participants*, (St Lucia: University of Queensland, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Roger Scott and Peter Spearritt, “‘Queensland Speaks’: A Progress Report” *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, 25/1 (2010): 50-51, 52.

While the central goal to explore the relationship between directors general and ministers expressed in the 2009 paper remains important (as evidenced by the fact that nearly all the interviewers highlighted this aim when asked about the goals of the project) other research interests have come into play. As other people have become involved, with the addition of a postdoctoral fellow and two doctoral students, the parameters have broadened. This means that a single or principal research question does not pervade all interviews. Moreover, the interviewers exercise a high degree of autonomy over the interviews they conduct and are not obliged to cover a set list of questions or topics. Over the course of the project the team has debated the merits of a set question list. Initially a question list was devised, and then this gave way to questions based on portfolio areas, but even so the use of these lists is mixed. We wondered about the potential impacts the lack of a set research focus and an established question list could have on the overall coherence of the project.

We were also interested in the effects of employing a diverse research team. It is now widely accepted that researchers are not independent, objective observers but are intimately involved in the creation of their research and its outcomes. This means the author's location in research is an important factor to consider. The Queensland Speaks project brings together a group of researchers from different backgrounds and with diverse interests. The Queensland Speaks interview team includes retired public servants, historians and political scientists with a range of research interests.

## The Queensland Speaks Interviewing Team

Interviewer	Gender	Role within Project	Number of Interviewees for Queensland Speaks	Undergraduate Qualifications	Postgraduate Qualification	Background	Previous interviewing experience	Research Interest
A	Male	Centre Director	3	History and Government	Urban History (PhD)	Primarily academic	Recruitment interviews, staff appraisal interviews, oral history e.g. Bicentennial History Project	Urban History, Oral History
B	Male	Chair of the Queensland Speaks advisory committee, adjunct appointment	15	History, Government and Ancient History	Public Administration, Political Science (PhD)	Primarily academic, former Director General	Recruitment interviews, staff appraisal interviews, research interviews	Public Administration, Political Science
C	Female	Adjunct appointment	7	Education	Political Science (PhD)	Primarily public service appointments	Recruitment interviews, public service interviews, PhD interviews	Public Administration, Political Science
D	Female	Adjunct appointment	5	Education, History, Government	Education (MA and Honorary Doctorates)	Teacher, school principal, school inspector, public servant, Director General	Recruitment interviews, public service interviews, research interviews	Education, Child Safety, History
E	Male	PhD student	14	Education, History, Philosophy	History (MPhil)	Teacher, public historian, university course coordinator	Department of Veterans' Affairs oral history project, research interviews	Public Policy, Political History
F	Female	Postdoctoral Research Fellow	14	History, Anthropology, Archaeology	Political Science (PhD)	University tutor	Recruitment interviews, Research interviews	Party Politics
G	Female	PhD candidate, Research Assistant	2	Sociology	Education, Public Policy (MA)	TAFE teacher, university tutor	Recruitment interviews, Research interviews	Public Policy

This diversity led us to investigate the project further to find out how knowledge is shared across the team. In order to gain a clearer insight into the Queensland Speaks team we conducted semi-structured interviews with the project's five principal interviewers to tease out decisions interviewers make about devising questions and their individual approaches to establishing rapport and asking difficult questions. Two other academics were also involved in the early stages of the project but at the time they had conducted a smaller number of interviews and were therefore not interviewed for this article. We also listened to a number of the interviews already conducted by the team. This data was then interrogated against the expectations established in the literature.

One of the key divisions is between those interviewers who come from history and those who come from political science. History and political science are separate but interconnected disciplines. We recognise that it is difficult to draw a clear line between the two, but as Levy states: "historians describe and explain the connections between a series of events, whereas political scientists formulate and test general theoretical propositions about relationships between variables or classes of events."<sup>4</sup> He argues political scientists are more likely to be engaged in developing and assessing the general applicability of theory while historians are more inclined to draw on a theory or a variety of theories in their explanations of certain periods or events. Levy also points out that historians and political scientists are trained differently, the standards and methodological approaches vary and they publish their outputs in their own distinct journals.<sup>5</sup>

One method employed in both disciplines is the practice of conducting interviews. Practitioners of different disciplines might have different views on the value and purpose of interviewing and employ different types of interviews but there is considerable overlap. Both history and social science literature emphasise the importance of preparation, building rapport, active listening and suggest similar ways to promote participation and avoid unnecessary bias.

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<sup>4</sup> Jack S. Levy, "Too Important to Leave to the Other: History and Political Science in the Study of International Relations," *International Security*, 22/1 (1997): 32.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 22-33.

The literature also explores the possible impacts of differences, such as age and gender, when interviewing. As discussed earlier, the team is made up of different ages, both sexes are represented, different knowledge bases and experiences – some primarily academic and some coming from public service backgrounds. Denzin writes a qualitative researcher cannot be seen as “an objective, politically neutral observer who stands outside and above the study of the social world”; rather, they are “historically and locally situated”.<sup>6</sup> This then impacts on the outcomes of the interview. The impact of gender is one aspect discussed in the literature. Jenny Ozga and Sharon Gewirtz state that, while interviewing, their status as women meant that they were perceived as “receptive and supportive”.<sup>7</sup> Status, gender and age differences all create and affect power dynamics within an interview. Ostrander writes of the feelings of “confusion” and “intimidation” that can occur when interviewing elite subjects.<sup>8</sup> We asked the Queensland Speakers interviewees about these issues in our discussions with them. While there was some disagreement they generally acknowledged that age, gender and status could have an impact on an interview. This led us to investigate further how knowledge is shared and norms established.

The study of team based qualitative research projects is an emerging field, which builds on studies of reflexivity in research. The research, unsurprisingly, argues the need for clearly communicated common goals across teams in order for the goals to be realised. Team knowledge refers to knowledge that is continually developed and shared amongst team members. How this knowledge is built within teams and the effects of this on project goals are some of the areas of interest for researchers examining team based research.<sup>9</sup> This literature is interesting to us because the interviews conducted for this paper highlighted a high level of shared knowledge across the team which raised the question of how this shared knowledge was generated. While some interactions occur on a formal basis much of it is informal and ad hoc and is generally more inclusive of those who are regularly on

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<sup>6</sup> Cited in Janine Owens, “Liberating Voices Through Narrative Methods: The Case for an Interpretive Research Approach,” *Disability & Society*, 22/3 (2007): 302.

<sup>7</sup> Sharon Gewirtz and Jenny Ozga, “Interviewing the Education Policy Elite,” *Researching the Powerful in Education*, (London: UCL Press, 1994), 196.

<sup>8</sup> Susan A. Ostrander, “‘Surely You’re Not in This Just to be Helpful’: Access, Rapport, and Interviews in Three Studies of Elites,” *Journal Of Contemporary Ethnography*, 22/7 (1993), 19.

<sup>9</sup> Natasha S. Mauthner and Andrea Doucet, “Knowledge Once Divided Can Be Hard to Put Together Again: An Epistemological Critique of Collaborative and Team-Based Research Practices,” *Sociology*, 42/5 (2008): 976.

campus. At times the interviewers have engaged in critical debate to explore conflicting approaches. While there are hierarchies involved in the production of best practice there is also opportunity to present alternative viewpoints and the meetings are generally conducted in a collegiate atmosphere where all team members are able to share their views.

In exploring this issue of team knowledge we have broadly categorised areas of shared knowledge within our project – knowledge of Queensland political context, knowledge of interview practice and knowledge of Queensland Speaks.

### **Team Knowledge of Interview Practice.**

Listening to early interviews reveals some subtle differences between interviews, but over time certain interview norms within Queensland Speaks have become deeply entrenched. The practice of beginning with questions about childhood and education and ending with questions about regrets and achievements is now followed by all interviewers. The cohesiveness of the projects however goes much further than these superficialities. Not only has the structure of the interviews become very similar, so has the general style and approach of the interviewers. This is something that we endeavoured to explore during our interviews with the Queensland Speaks interviewers.

Comparing the responses we gathered from the interviews we conducted, one common theme was the use of intuition. Further probing during these interviews of what was meant by ‘intuition’ showed that interviewers used intuition to guide them on what questions to ask, whether to push for an answer and when to move onto a new topic. One interviewer stated that: “you just feel it”. The use of intuition is illustrated in the phrasing of questions. Interviewers seem to know instinctively whether an interviewee will be able to handle robust questioning.

The connection between intuition and its basis in experience raised doubt about the coherence of the project. We argue that the use of intuition by the interviewers is due to past interviewing experience and shared knowledge of interviewing practice. In practical terms interview skills and approaches have not often been discussed in a group forum and no set protocols have been laid out, however sharing of interviewing skills and approaches

does occur across the Queensland Speaks team. From listening to the interviews and talking to the interviewers it seems that they have very similar instincts when it comes to pressing interviewees for answers.

One way that Queensland Speaks interviewers share knowledge about interviewing skills is by listening to interviews conducted by other team members. This occurs when interviewing in pairs and by listening to conducted interviews. Early in the project a sample interview was conducted with a member of the original Queensland Speaks committee who had formally been a public servant. Those present had the opportunity to listen to the interviewing styles and skills of interviewer B who is one of the most experienced members of the team.

Another avenue for shared knowledge construction is during informal interview briefings. The practice of interview debriefing has emerged in two ways. Firstly our practice of interviews in pairs naturally leads to discussion afterwards. Secondly the equipment needs to be returned to the centre after each interview and this presents an opportunity to discuss various aspects of the interview and to raise questions for future interviews. This is an important source of information for other members of the team and leads to the contribution of shared learning.

While future interview questions do arise from informal briefings, the main source of material when determining questions is knowledge of Queensland political history. Our interviews revealed that knowledge of the person, their career and the politics of the time were crucial in the development of interview questions.

### **Team Knowledge of Queensland Political History**

Our individual knowledge of Queensland political history has been acquired in combinations of various means, for example through formal education, professional experience and lived experience. While members of the team have different understandings, levels of knowledge and perspectives on important event; from our research it was clear that all members of the team placed emphasis on the importance of through preparation before an

interview. For the Queensland Speaks team preparedness means a detailed brief on the career background of the interviewee and the key events of their career.

During our research it became clear that those interviewers who had firsthand experience with the interviewees, especially those who had previously worked in the Queensland public service, used the briefs to refresh their memory but relied heavily on past experience to ask more penetrating questions. In comparison, the younger academics used the briefs and their own research area to prepare a detailed list of questions relating to policy events, career achievements and major political events prior to the interview.

From listening to the interviews, it can be argued that the style and structure of the interviews are similar. The length and phrasing of questions is individual, but each interviewer uses broad questions to structure the interview (these questions in part determined by the brief). These broad questions are most usually followed up by questions that probe for more detail. The experienced person may ask for this off the top of his/her head by engaging with what the interviewee is saying and drawing on their own memory of the period. The less experienced interviewer starts with a broad question based on the brief but also has a detailed list of detailed questions, the posing of which is often triggered by a comment/series of comments by the interviewee. This has led us to question whether knowledge gained through past experience can be simulated by knowledge gained through research. When faced with this question during our interviews of the team, one of our more experienced interviewers stated that you would get more out of some people because of a prior connection but then added that this was dependant on both the person and the rapport that had been built. He concluded this part of our interview by saying that it was not possible to say whether a peer relationship would produce a better relationship but emphasised that it would be a different interview. For our interviewers their interviewing style and question list is also shaped by this knowledge of the goals of the Queensland Speaks project.



## **Team Knowledge of Queensland Speaks**

When we asked our interviewers about the goal of the project it was clear that a focus on the relationship between senior public servants and politicians was seen as a core objective of the Queensland Speaks project. The interviews certainly cover this ground but for a political scientist investigating this question it might be more useful to ask penetrating questions about public admin policy and investigate individual policies in greater depth to see what role each side played. This however is not what the Queensland Speaks project does. Instead, there is an implicit understanding of the original goal of the project as established in the ethical clearance document. The interviews generate an overview of the person's career and the aggregate interviews provide the audience with a sense of the role of individuals play in policy making and cover major events of the period. This has the benefit of creating interviews that are of general human interview which (it is hoped) will spark public interest and invigorate the study of state politics. The primacy of this more general objective is reflected in questions asked and the reluctance to continue probing into topics when the interviewee feels uncomfortable.

As mentioned earlier, a brief set of questions was drawn up in order to facilitate the aims of the project, but it was soon decided that it would be necessary to shape the questions to get the most out of each interview. It was then decided that for certain portfolio areas a number of common questions should be put to the subject to aid comparative work. Use of these questions is mixed, with interviewers shaping the questions to reflect their own styles, using some and discarding others. Members of the team may be invited to submit questions for a potential interviewee that they are not directly involved with, but may have insights into the person or questions they may wish to have included. The value of this approach is that it allows interviewers to draw on their individual strengths.

Despite this flexibility interviews largely cover the similar ground and take a similar approach. For instance from talking to interviewers and listening to interviews we have found a willingness to approach difficult ground but a reluctance to push for answers. As one interviewer states "I'm not a pushy interviewer" and this seems to be a refrain echoed by the interviewers without being an explicit policy. This goes back to what was mentioned earlier about the interviewers have similar instincts. This position is linked back to the

purpose of the project. The goal is to capture the essence of a subject's career as opposed to answering a specific research question and a hard hitting approach is less likely to project the desired effect. This means that not all audience members will find the answers they seek and one interviewer acknowledged the potential need for follow up interviews to pursue more specific research questions.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Despite our initial concerns we found the diverse team can be seen as a strength of the project. The relaxed method of communication works well if we ensure all members are kept up to date. Our research confirmed the benefits of peer interviewing and reinforced the need to carefully consider the pairing of interviewers with interviewees. The production of this article and the launch of the website also forced the team to reflect on the aims of the project and how they have evolved over time and we hope this will be beneficial as we move into the next stage of the project.