

Using the Process-Based Interview to Investigate Comedy Writing

Jeffrey Davis and Peter Desberg*

Abstract

Traditional forms of interviews have clear limitations in the investigation of creative processes, particularly with the work of artists. This investigation used the Process Interview as a tool to investigate the actual writing processes of professional comedy writers. This interview process revealed a number of interesting facets of the writing process in a way that would have been impossible to obtain by limiting the interview to questions asked by the interviewer in a self-report format. The process appears to be valid and reliable. The potential future use of video is also discussed.

Keywords: humor, comedy, interview, comedy-writers, screenwriters

Introduction

How do comedy writers do what they do? If everyone knew the answer, the same comedy writers would not get hired over-and-over again. Moreover, we would all be sparkling dinner guests and be invited to many more parties than is currently the case. To date, the answer to the question does not have a satisfactory answer. There are a spate of "how to write comedy" books but given the results produced by their readers they do not seem to answer this question very well. In interviews, comedy writers are often asked how they do what they do, but their reflections about what they do are rarely representative of their work. Still, the interview is probably the most useful tool to obtain this information. This investigation uses a new version of the interview called a Process-Based Interview that examines these writers' processes by having them create work within the arc of the interview. This is a departure from the traditional question-and-answer format most interviews take.

*Jeffrey Davis, M.F.A. Chair, Department of Screen Writing, School of Film and Television, Loyola Marymount University, U.S.A.

Dr. Peter Desberg, Coordinator, Technology Based Education M.A. Program California State University Dominguez Hills, U.S.A.

The interview is one of the major research tools used in qualitative research. In medicine, doctors and mental health practitioners use it to assess the health of their patients. Sociologists, anthropologists and ethnographers have long used it to identify cultural conditions and social relationships. Businesses use it as a common device by which to make hiring selections. This paper limits its focus to the interview as it is used in the arts.

Interviews in the Arts

In the arts, the interview has long been a method by which aspects of an artist's character and work are investigated. Within the arts there are several forms the interview has taken. Gubrium and Holstein (2003, 29) cite as an example of the traditional interview: the great journalist Studs Terkel's seminal book of interviews, *Working* (1972). In this approach the interviewer simply turns on a tape recorder and asks the subject questions that are "casual in nature." In short, it was a conversation and, "In time, the sluice gates of damned up hurts and dreams were open." Lawrence Grobel (2004) identifies two major types of interview. The Question and Answer interview is a straightforward interview method with little or no comment by the interviewer. The most famous examples of this type of interview for writers are to be found in the *Paris Review: Writers at Work* series and *Inside The Actors Studio*. Grobel also identifies the Profile interview that includes the interviewer's view of the subject and will rarely take only a question and answer approach, but it will often take the form of an essay. This approach is most commonly found in *The New Yorker* magazine used by such writers as Susan Orleans and Malcolm Gladwell.

Michael Patton (1990) in his book, *Qualitative Patterns and Research Methods* identifies four types of interviews: 1) the Informal, Conversational Interview – there are no predetermined questions asked and the interviewer goes with the flow of the interview; 2) the General Interview Guide Approach – It is intended to ensure that the same information is collected from each subject. In this second form, there is more focus than the conversational approach, but allows for a greater degree of freedom; 3) the Standardized, Open-Ended Interview where respondents are free to choose how to answer the question; and, 4) the Closed or Fixed Response Interview - All subjects are asked the

same set of questions and are asked to select from the same set of alternatives. This form is suggested for use by inexperienced interviewers.

Robert Atkinson (2002), in the *Handbook of Interview Research*, identifies another form of interview, calling it the Life Story Interview. In this method there is no set form, often no specific selected topic and the interviewer takes a passive role. He allows the respondent to document her own story in her own words.

A method of interviewing in which the interviewer's personality and ideas enter into the interview is In-Depth Interviewing, cited by John M. Johnson (2002). This method takes the form of one-on-one, in person, interviews with specific topics.

The Interactive Interview (Carolyn Ellis et. al., 1997) usually occurs in a small group setting. The goal is for all those participating to act as researchers and research participants. Carolyn Ellis and Leigh Berger (2003) cite another method of interviewing they call the Collaborative Interview. Like the In-Depth Interview, it is one-on-one, but here the interviewer will go farther than sharing ideas; he may share his own experiences.

Jack Douglas (1985) discusses Creative Interviewing. He suggests that this methodology is needed for deep disclosure. "The interview should be an occasion for the interviewer to share his or her own feelings and deepest thoughts." This allows respondents to open and share theirs. (Gubrium and Holstein, 2003).

Mark A. Runco (2004) cites a study designed to explore the process of interpretive artists, specifically actors. The study further investigated the social influences that enhanced or undermined an actor's creativity, the tension that occurs between the actor's personal and character identities, the need for spontaneity in the creative process. Semi-structural interviews were conducted with three actors.

All of these interview formats are essentially self-report interviews. The interviewer asks questions in a variety of formats and the interviewee responds. They differ in the amount

of structure in the interview, the amount of standardization from interview-to-interview and the amount of themselves that the interviewers insert, but they are all based on self-report of the interviewee. If the interviewer is interested in the artistic process actually used by the person she is interviewing, she has to settle for a description of it rather than seeing it produced.

The Process-Based Interview

Researchers interested in arts creation have realized the limitations of these types of self-report interviews and recognized the need to include the artist's process as part of the interview situation. Patrick (1937) compared the working processes of artists and non-artists. He could not find any differences between the way they approached problem-solving tasks. Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi (1976) examined how artists approached problem-solving. Csikszentmihalyi (1998), in his book on *The Psychology of Flow*, developed a remarkable procedure of presenting artists with beepers and randomly beeping them to see if he could catch them during the act of creation so he could question them during the spontaneous act of creation.

Sawako Yokochi and Takeshi Okada (2005) developed an interview format in which the visual artist is interviewed as he composed works of art from inception to completion and asked what was happening as these works progressed. These researchers helped transform interview methodology into a format that is immersed in process. Thus far, their reported work is limited to working with a single artist.

Mace and Ward (2002) noted that there was a validity problem when artists were given a task and then interviewed. Artists, particularly visual artists, generally selected their own tasks. They cautioned that when an artist is given a contrived task, it may not simulate the task and environment in which the artist usually worked. Similar cautions were made by Jones, Runco, Dorman & Freeland (1997) and Mace (1997). Mumford, Reiter-Palmon and Redmond (1994) point out that people are generally more successful and creative when engaged in tasks that match their own interests and personal values.

The Comedy Writers Interviews

The goal in the Process Interviews cited thus far was to map the creativity process. The studies were largely confined to the area of visual arts. Until neuroscientists can map the creativity process onto specific areas of the neocortex, or cognitive scientists are ready to map the creative process within the Multiple Intelligences identified by Gardner (2007) or the Structure of Intellect model identified by Guilford (1967), these goals remain lofty. The present article extends the interview process itself. The present qualitative study attempts to pilot an expanded Process Interview format for examining a creative area that has had limited study—the field of professional comedy writing.

Method

Subjects – The subjects were 30 professional comedy writers who have all worked on well-known movies or situation comedies. Each has an extensive body of work that is well known. Among the writers interviewed was the creator of *Gilligan's Island* and *The Brady Bunch*, the Head Writer from *Home Improvement*, the Head Writer from *Roseanne* the co-creator of *Frasier* and the co-creator of *Everybody Loves Raymond*. They consisted of twenty-four men and six women ranging in age from thirty to eighty-nine. There were a total of twenty-five interviews.

Materials and Apparatus – Each interview was recorded separately on both audio and video formats. Initially, for the audiotaping, each participant had a separate Shure SM-57 microphone connected to a Sony mixer that was connected to a Technics cassette recorder. Later, an H4 Zoom digital recorder replaced the analog recorder. The video recording was done on a Cannon Optura camcorder with a Canon digital microphone.

The investigators created a generic sitcom premise that was fleshed out very minimally so that the writers had a very broad range of paths in which to develop it. There was also a list of follow-up interview questions created, to be given after each writer had

developed the premise, if they had not already provided that information during their premise development section of the interview.

Procedure – As the equipment was being set up, each writer was given a written copy of the premise to study. They were encouraged to ask questions if anything seemed unclear. The researchers made it clear to the interviewees that this was an informal interview. They were told that they had total freedom to develop or change the premise in any way they chose. They were told that every change they made and every question they asked was part of “their process.” They were also told prior to the interview that if they preferred to do the interview with a partner or alone either was acceptable. If they wanted to recreate the feeling of a writer’s room, the investigators told them they would be willing to participate with them.

Results

The validity of a new process can only be evaluated by its results. When dealing with a new interview process, the results should reveal information that would be difficult, if not impossible, to obtain from other interview procedures. After having done twenty-five interviews with comedy writers, we can show results that meet this criterion. By observing writers writing in an environment where the investigators could interact with them and influence changes in real time, we believe that we were able to observe and learn more about the process of writing comedy than traditional interviews have been able to reveal. Below is a sample of the information, and inferences about that information, that were observed.

Most of the writers began their premise development by considering how the premise related to the requirements of the commercial marketplace. Because they were experienced professionals, this was a major concern when presenting their ideas. When they began, they wanted to know the boundaries, although they were told that they could go anywhere with the premise they wanted to, because this is the way they typically work. When they were asked to go outside of these considerations, or ignore them entirely, they were able to revise their ideas into any areas we suggested. For example,

when asked if they could darken the premise, they immediately found a way. When asked to develop a character in a new direction, they quickly found a way to adapt that character.

There seemed to be two types of writers: those who focused on structure and those who focused on jokes. They were by no means mutually exclusive, but most seem to **tip** one way or the other. Using that recognition, when they worked with partners, they usually selected their opposites. Of the teams interviewed, one member was usually focused on structure while the other seemed to be the freer comedy line or joke writer. The evidence suggests that they seek out their complement rather than their clone, even though each could assume either role. They drifted toward their areas of strength and comfort. There seemed to be harmony in all of the writing teams interviewed. They all valued each other's contributions and fed off each other's creativity. Although they often kidded each other, the kidding was never about the task; they never demeaned their partner's writing ability.

One unexpected finding was that almost a quarter of the writers had done graduate level work in math or science. These writers with math and science backgrounds were more concerned with story structure than any other aspect of writing. They were all much more disciplined in their approach to writing.

Several writers had backgrounds in standup comedy. The investigators found that these writers all said that they enjoyed their experience in Writer's Rooms more than those writers without standup comedy experience. Most of the writers with standup comedy experience had an approach that was more impulsive than reflective. Although they also created story structures, they preferred writing individual situations and setups. Their work seemed freer because they seemed to be less constrained by story elements and the need for consistency.

Almost all of the writers reframed the premise in one-way or another. Most of them related it to personal events and relationships in their own lives. Often the writers

changed the entire structure and character base. Elliott Schoenman, who ran the Writer's Room on *Home Improvement*, was finishing a book about his father. He changed the premise from a comedy about a mother and daughter to the relationship of a son and father.

There were several interesting paths the writers took for creating humor. Every writer looked for story elements with conflict to create humor. This was the most consistent finding throughout the interviews. While most of the conflict was rooted in hostility, some writers like Leonard Stern co-creator of *Get Smart*, found it in conflicting attempts of characters to be helpful to one another. They showed that conflict **can** arise by a clash of good intentions coming from love between characters. Bob Meyer, who ran the Writer's Room for *Roseanne* for many years, was able to create a hilarious scene based on a character's drug addiction. Several writers said that their writing had to have social significance.

In several interviews, as writers were developing the premise, stories arose directly from experiences they had that might not have come out in traditional interviews. They came directly from the path they were taking in their premise development. For example, as Elliott Schoenman was talking about a writer who was very funny, but disorganized, he used a toy train to teach her story structure. He went into her office, laid out a straight section of track, then added a place where the track diverged and led to a dead end. Then he told the young writer, "If your story is following this track, and then suddenly veers off to this curved section...you come right into my office."

Many of the writers spoke about the difference between writing comedy for movies versus TV. They changed the premise depending on the venue they selected. In many cases, they did this spontaneously. In other cases, the investigators suggested the idea of switching venues and the writers were easily able to adapt to the request.

Several of the writers made disparaging remarks about people in the entertainment industry. They identified constraints and control issues that writers had to endure. In

other cases, as they worked, many of the writers attributed something they came up with to the influence of specific mentors right after they came up with it.

The most interesting result is that when all of the interview data was aggregated, when asked, *all* of the writers were clearly able to develop the premise effortlessly. All of the writers interviewed were able to take the premise in any direction the interviewers suggested. None of the writers either blocked or choked although this was a novel situation for them.

At the end of each interview, the writers were asked to evaluate the process to obtain direct feedback. Every one of the writers said they thought the process was effective. Their observations indicated that the interviews elicited information that was different, more accurate and interesting than traditional interview formats they had participated in. One of the writers pointed out that he is often asked to come into a producer's office, receive a premise and they suggest how he would develop it. He pointed out that this is a task most writers face throughout their careers. Finally, several writers said they planned to develop material they generated during the process-based interview and in two cases, in their words, "Go out with it."

Discussion and Conclusions

The authors believe the results of the interviews have demonstrated the validity of the Process Interview in studying the work of comedy writers. Many of the writers spontaneously noted that although they were frequently interviewed, they were never asked to perform on the spot. They said this format revealed information that had never come out in previous interviews. Many of the major findings were reported in the previous section, but the actual processes and techniques observed greatly exceed the space available here. The full interviews can be found in Desberg and Davis (2010). Additional interview materials and short video excerpts can be found by going to www.showmethefunnyonline.com.

There are threats to validity when utilizing any new technique. One obvious threat in this investigation is a sampling bias. All of the interviewees were seasoned professional writers. They were all used to working under varying environments and responding to novel tasks. It cannot be said that this interview procedure would yield similar results with emerging writers or artists in other disciplines. Because the focus was the investigation of the methodology used by professional comedy writers, the Process Interview was quite successful. We would caution any generalization of the findings to other groups of writers or other art forms. Because this was a one-time interview, there was no way to assess the reliability of the method, but the consistency from writer-to-writer suggests that this is a reliable interview format for this population. The fact that all of the writers revealed that they started by identifying conflict first suggests that there may be some comedy script writing universals. The divergent pathways they took and the varied outcomes we collected also shows how much idiosyncratic thinking is a part of this process.

There are several directions that will be interesting to follow from this point forward. There are plans to investigate other genres of writing. In this study, video recording was used as an archiving vehicle. A more detailed investigation of the video records of these interviews will potentially provide additional data. Facial and body language can be examined as a concomitant of creative processes. Measurement of the relationship between the amount of smiling and laughter as a function of humor output may also demonstrate interesting connections. As a research tool, this form of interview with a large group of professional writers, all beginning with the same premise and instructions, permits a useful opportunity to analyze and compare processes across groups of comedy writers.

Today, even with PET Scans and FMRI's, it is still not possible to unravel the brains of comedy writers. The authors believe that observing comedy writers in action, interacting with them as they write and questioning them immediately during and after they have written, gives the best available insights into their processes. Traditional interviews often

fall prey to the old saying, "The Autobiography is the highest form of fiction." The Process interview tempers the artist and provides a measure of ecological validity.

References

- Robert Atkinson (2002), The Life Story Interview. In Gubrium, J.F. & Holstein, J.A. (eds.) *The Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. 1998. *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* (Masterminds Series). New York: Basic Books.
- Desberg, Peter and Davis, Jeffrey. 2010. *Show Me The Funny: At the Writers' Table with Hollywood's Top Comedy Writers*. New York: Sterling Publishing Company.
- Douglas, J. 1985. *Creative Interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Ellis, CA. and Berger, L. 2003. Their Story/My Story/Our Story: Including the Researcher's Experience in Interview Research. In Holstein, J.A. & Gubrium, J.F. (eds.) *Inside Interviewing: New Lenses, New Concerns*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Gardner, Howard. 2007. *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons*. New York: Perseus Books.
- Getzels, Jacob and Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. 1976. *The Creative Vision: A Longitudinal Study of Problem Solving In Art*. New York: Wiley.
- Grobel, Lawrence. 2004. *The Art of the Interview: Lessons from a Master of the Craft*. New York: Random House Digital, Inc.
- Gubrium, Jaber F. and Holstein, James A. 2003. *Postmodern Interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Guilford, Joy P. 1967. *The Nature of Human Intelligence*. New York: McGraw-Hill

Johnson, J.M. 2002. In-Depth Interviewing. In Gubrium, J.F. & Holstein, J.A. (eds.) *The Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Jones, Kerry, Runco, Mark A., Dorman, Casey and Freeland, Darryl C. 1997. Influential factors in artists' lives and themes in their art work. *Creativity Research Journal*, 10, 221-228.

Mace, Mary-Anne Mace, Mary-Anne and Ward, Tony 2002. Modeling the creative process: A grounded theory analysis of creativity in the domain of art making. *Creativity Research Journal*, 10, 179-192

Mumford, Michael D., Reiter-Palmon, Ronni, & Redmond, Michael R. 1994. Problem construction and cognition: Applying problem representations in ill-defined domains. In M.A. Runco (Ed.), *Problem finding, problem solving, and creativity* (pp. 3-39). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Nisbett, Richard E. and Wilson, Timothy D. 1977. Telling more than we know: Verbal reports on mental processes. *Psychological Review*, 84, 231-259.

Patrick, Catherine. 1937. Creative thought in artists. *Journal of Psychology*, 4, 35-73.

Patton, Michael (1990) *Qualitative Patterns and Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Runco, Mark A. 2004. Everyone has creative potential. In Sternberg, Robert J. (Ed); Grigorenko, Elena L. (Ed); Singer, Jerome L. (Ed), (2004). *Creativity: From potential to realization*. (pp. 21-30). Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association.

Sawako, Yokochi. & Okada, Takeshi. 2005. Creative Cognitive Process of Art Making: A Field Study of a Traditional Chinese Ink Painter. *Creativity Research Journal* 17:2&3, 241-255.

Terkel, Studs. 1975. *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*. New York: Harper Collins.