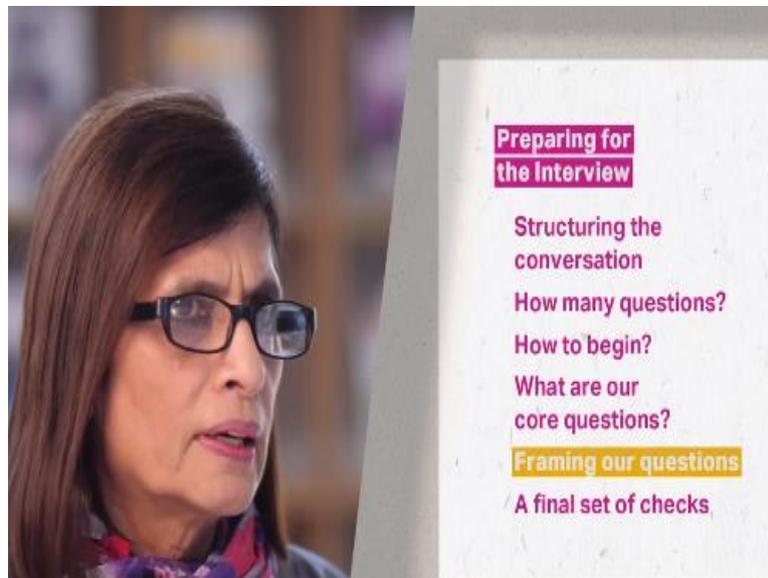


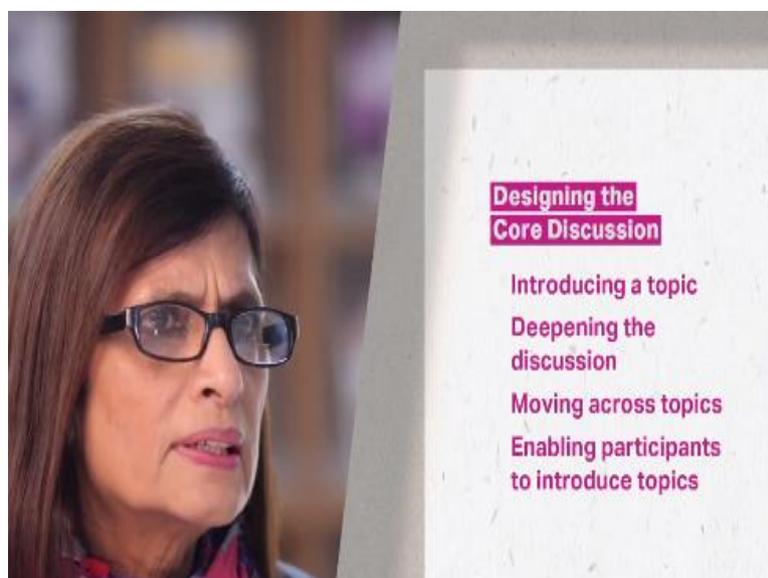
– Bangalore
Lecture 47
Designing the Core Discussion I

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In designing the interview guide, we need to think about how to structure and frame the core discussion and each topic in it.

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How do we introduce a topic? How do we deepen the discussion through appropriate probing? How do we move across topics? And most importantly, how do we enable participants to introduce new themes into the conversation?

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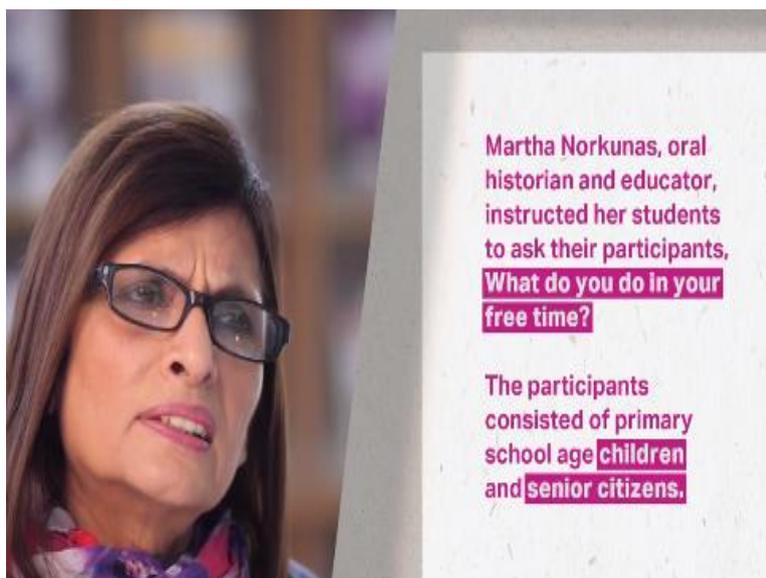


A lot of this can be worked out as we frame the questions that we want to ask. In an interview, the differences and similarities between our participants and us often manifest in the language we use. Sometimes, our primary language may be different from that of our participants. So we attempt to learn the other's language or work through translators. Even when we speak the same language as our participants, chances are that we may use it differently.

Each of us might use words and phrases that the other does not understand. Or use references that are common in one culture, but alien in the other. This is something that we try to be aware of as we frame our interview guide. We try as far as possible to use words and phrases that are commonly understood. Alternatively, we could try to learn some words and phrases from their culture, especially those that refer to phenomena we hope to be discussing.

The risk here though is that we might use those phrases in an incorrect manner leading to more confusion than clarity. Sometimes even words and phrases that we think of as simple and common may have a very different meaning in the context of our participants.

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To understand this, Martha Norkunas suggests an exercise to her students. Ask a senior citizen and a primary school child this question. "What do you do in your free time?" What do you suppose could be the answer the researchers caught? Perhaps the children said that they spend their free time playing outdoors or watching television. Or that they play games on their parents' mobile phones.

Senior citizens may have said that they spend their free time indulging in hobbies such as music or art. Or that they try to spend time with family and friends got no such answers from their participants. Instead, they found that children and seniors alike had trouble answering the question. The senior persons were no longer going to work and so had a more or less organic routine to their day.

The children on the other hand, spent their day in one activity or another, including learning music, always busy, always doing something. For both, there was no clear concept of 'free time'. The question drew a blank. Sure, 'free time' is a common phrase, but it refers to a concept that is identified by a certain group, perhaps those who have formal jobs. It makes little sense to participants whose days are not structured by regular work.

We cannot always predict what will or will not make sense to our participants. However, we can have a fairly decent idea of their language. The simplest thing to do is to go through

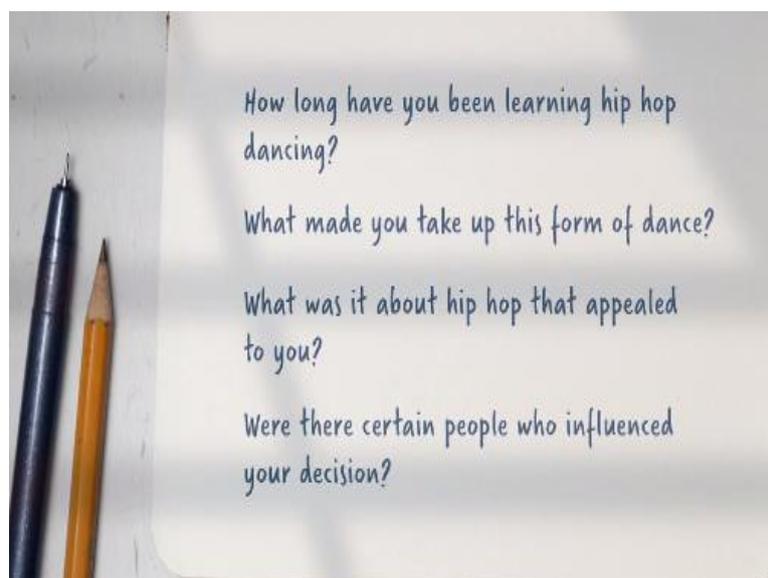
drafts of our guide and remove any jargon or words that may be unclear. It helps to start a new topic start by talking about specifics. Answering questions that are simple and straightforward makes it easy for participants to settle into the conversation.

For example, some researchers wanted to learn about the financial behaviour of their participants. They started by asking participants to list the various bills they needed to pay every month or every quarter. For many householders, this is an easy question to answer. It is a calculation they do almost every month. So the question proved to be a good start to the discussion, and the researchers got to learn about various expenses of their participants' household.

Asking specific questions need not lead to a close-ended discussion. On the contrary, we can use our initial questions to open up a new topic. For this, we often use follow up questions or what are sometimes called probing questions. For example, if we want to learn about a dancer's relationship to their art, we may begin by asking how long have you been learning hip hop dancing.

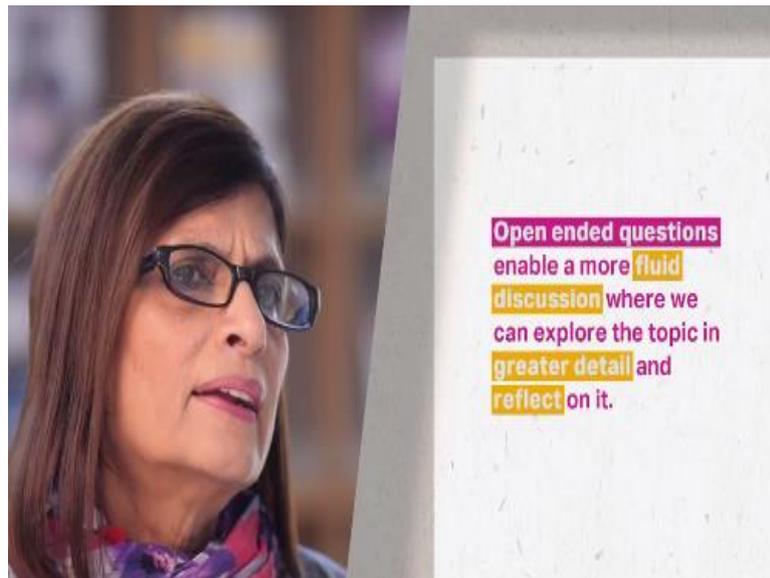
See this is a closed-ended question with a pretty specific answer. But we can build upon it using an open-ended probe.

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Such as, "what made you take up this form of dance?", or "what was it about hip hop that appeals to you? And were there some people who influenced your decision to learn hip hop?"

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Open-ended questions enable the participant to reflect and give descriptive responses. The idea is to encourage them to speak at length and elaborate upon their ideas and experiences. In reflecting on their experiences, they are likely to introduce new themes and topics into the conversation. And these new themes often bring new and invaluable dimensions to our research.