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Interviews as an Assessment Tool

*Boyd Fuller**

Editors' Note: Some assessment methods constitute a kind of blunt instrument, in which the subtleties of students' understanding or lack of it may be evaluated only approximately, with no granular detail. Fuller finds this problematic. If a focus of rethinking teaching in our field has been, and must be, on improving the responsiveness of teaching to students' individual needs, some form of individuation in finding out just where a given student is weak is essential. Fuller argues for using interviews. In a series of experiments, he finds that three distinct kinds of interview support assessment of different skills, different methods of testing those skills, and different lessons drawn from the experience by the student. One of the three, Fuller concludes, largely failed his goals for it; but the other two are more promising.

Introduction

One-on-one interviews can be used effectively to assess students, especially when the professor wants to control the negotiating environment to test for certain skills and to assess students using an array of methods that do not overly bias grading towards students with strong writing skills. Furthermore, if assessment is also considered as a teaching moment, an interview of this type can provide an important simultaneous opportunity to explore what the students have learned, from the interview itself as well as from their ongoing real-time and real-life negotiations associated with the course, This chapter looks at the author's experiments with three interview-based assessment methods and compares their effectiveness in assessing and guiding student learning.

The involvement of the professor in assessment usually is limited to the creation of the assignment, the answering of questions that clarify the purpose and content of it, and the grading of the students' work either through reading it or observing it. In the interview meth-

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ods I introduce and compare here, the teacher is also an active participant in the assessment exercise. As a participant in the assessment interviews, I can use questions or certain negotiation behaviors to direct the exercise better, so that the assessment of students is improved, and sometimes what they learn from the exercise is improved as well.

The three interview methods vary with regard to the skills they test for, how they test those skills, and the desired lessons that the instructor hopes the students will take away from the exercise. The first method, which I call here the Mixed Scenario Interview, combines analysis with practice; it presents students with three to five brief negotiation scenarios, some of which students are expected to analyze and present potential strategies for and some of which students are expected to briefly negotiate with the professor. The second method, which I term the Simulated Negotiation Interview, is essentially one, longer, negotiation simulation in which the teacher negotiates with the student. The third method, which I term here the Coaching Interview, is an interview in which the professor encourages the student to analyze difficult negotiation moments and skills in order to understand their sources and to devise strategies to produce better outcomes or skills. Here, the instructor is measuring the student's ability to be a reflective practitioner.

My use of these three methods has been experimental. I have used the Mixed Scenario and Simulated Negotiation interviews once and the Coaching Interviews four times. All were used in the framework of semester-length courses. In this chapter, I provide descriptions of how I have used them as well a brief comparison of the three methods. What I have found is that the Simulated Negotiation and Coaching Interviews were worthwhile both for enhanced assessment of students and for improving what they learn from the course. The Mixed Scenario Interview assessment was less useful.

In the next section, I will describe my motivations in implementing these fairly innovative approaches. Then I will describe them in some detail, including what I have learned from conducting them. In the final section, I will compare them and conclude with some overall reflections on what I have learned from the combination of experiments in using interviews that bring the teacher into the evaluation process.

The Motivation

My motivation for experimenting with these three interview approaches is three-fold. My first motivation revolves around recent research, as well as my own experiences, which argue that individuals can best learn and demonstrate their understanding through different tasks and media. For example, Howard Gardner's (1983; 1999) research on

"multiple intelligences" reveals that there are a number of different ways – e.g., through numbers, logic, hands-on manipulation, visual representations, and so on – that people can employ to learn about the world and demonstrate their understanding of it. Each person has strengths and weaknesses across the different intelligences such that, for example, one person may be strong in numbers but weak in logic while another may be strong in logic but not strong in hands-on application. Based on this idea, Gardner recommends that children's education be done so that any topic is covered using at least three different approaches – e.g., the Holocaust might be covered through film (visual), statistics (numerical), and some form of logical representation.[1] In the case of my course, I want to provide students with multiple ways of demonstrating their understanding and application of the skills and concepts, to achieve three teaching and assessment benefits:

1) I could more effectively teach the material to students who individually, and perhaps also by culture, have different strengths and weaknesses among the different intelligences;

2) In assessment, I could avoid favoring those who are strong in logic and writing; and

3) Utilizing the personalized interview format allows me to adapt how I test students as I see their performance. For example, if someone is shy, the negotiation can proceed a bit slower, so that they get warmed up and then I can see what they can do afterwards.

Finally, I was also curious about whether I would find students who performed significantly better during these interview assessments compared to their written work.

My second motivation is to use the assessment process in order to increase students' understanding and facility with a set of core negotiation skills, behaviors, and attitudes. My experience with past courses was that students often left the course with an uneven and mixed set of concepts. As a result, I have gradually reduced the number of ideas to focus on a foundation of ideas – currently Harvard's Seven Elements Framework (with a few additions and modifications[2]) – and their application. Interviews allow me to see students' analysis and at-the-table skills in action, and to provide direct feedback on them in addition to assessing them.

The third motivation is more personal. As a grader, I sometimes find it difficult to be continually reading written material. I find it refreshing to be able to grade students by observing and engaging with them.

Three Different Types of Interview Assessments

A summary of the different tests' characteristics is presented in Table 1 below. In common, the three approaches seek to assess students' skills in and/or understanding of negotiation through oral interaction rather than written product. They all differ from graded inter-student simulated negotiations in that: 1) the students' performance is not dependent on their peers' actions; and, correspondingly, 2) the professor can influence how the negotiation proceeds, in order to test certain skills. The first two methods were applied in the basic negotiation course that I teach; the third method, coaching interviews, has been applied only in an advanced negotiation course, as will be detailed below

Mixed Scenario Interview Assessments

The mixed scenario interview assessment was the second assessment tool I attempted and the first one for a basic negotiation course. This interview assessment presented one or two brief negotiation scenarios, in which I would ask the student to negotiate with me for five minutes. The other parts of the interview presented students with different scenarios and asked them to present their analysis of the situation, what they might do about it and why. When I did this exercise, I provided no debriefing, because I did not want the answers being shared with other students (since I can only interview one student at a time). These interviews went on for about twenty-five minutes each. With a five minute break between interviews, I spent thirty minutes per interview per person.

Grading criteria

In terms of grading criteria, I had different criteria for the negotiation scenarios and for the analytic scenarios. For the analytic scenarios, I was looking for students' ability to apply particular concepts that had been introduced in the course. For example, I presented them with scenarios that required them to apply coalitional analysis as described in David Lax and James Sebenius' work on the same (Sebenius 1996; Lax and Sebenius 2006). For that scenario, students were graded on whether they considered a basic form of decision analysis and patterns of deference. For the negotiation scenarios, I graded students on whether and how they sought their counterpart's interests (i.e., mine) and whether they then tried to find options that met both their interests and mine.

What I learned

These interviews did provide me with some sense of how easily students could apply concepts and skills. It was clear, for example, that some students were quite familiar with the concepts and could use them

to diagnose situations presented to them on the spot. Similarly, some students could apply the negotiation skills even when put on the spot while others struggled to do the same. Furthermore, there was some

Table 1: A Comparison of the Three Interview Assessment Methods

	Mixed Scenario	Simulated Negotiation	Coaching
Length of Interview	• 30 minutes • Approximately 7 minutes for each scenario.	• 40 minutes • 25-30 minutes negotiation • 10-15 minutes debrief	• 45 minutes • Approximately equal time spent on analysis versus strategizing
Content of the Interview	• 1-2 mini negotiation scenarios for negotiating (depending on how they did in first negotiation scenario) • 2-3 mini scenarios for analysis	• One negotiation scenario: two-party, multi-issue	• Identify negotiation skill or behavior that the student wants to improve • Design of strategy/experiment for improving skills/behavior • Reflection on outcomes of strategy/experiment • Design of new strategy/experiment for improving skill/behavior
Grading Criteria	• Analytic scenarios ↳can apply concepts to scenarios and devise possible strategies • Negotiation scenarios ↳seek counterpart's interests ↳creative options	• Preparation (written preparation and strategy) • Initial search for interests • Prepared options • search for interests and redirecting negotiations in the face of resistance • Creativity	• Able to unpack experiences to identify surprising, difficult, or otherwise interesting events • Identify possible root causes • Formulate strategies and experiments to test them

differentiation between what students achieved in their written as-signments and what they demonstrated during the interview. Since one of the main purposes of the interview method is to provide people with weaker writing skills with a different medium for demonstrating their understanding, I felt that this outcome supported use of the tool.

On the other hand, I did not feel at the end that I had truly tested the students' negotiation skills. While the interview did al-low students with better oral than written fluency to show their understanding, it still seemed to favor those who can think quick-ly. The negotiation scenarios were too short for them to move beyond a simple opening phase of a negotiation, and did not pro-vide a chance for "warming up," including relationship build-ing, the negotiation of communication dynamics, and so on.

Simulated Negotiation Interviews

Unsatisfied with the efficacy of the mixed scenario interview assess-ment, I tried focusing the interview around a single negotiation sce-nario. The rationale here was:

1) to focus the interview assessment around skills rather than analysis;
2) to give some students the opportunity to "warm up," with the recognition that not all can start negotiations at the same speed;
3) to test a wider array of skills; and
4) to give students the opportunity to show their skills in more depth during a more difficult and complex negotiation.

To meet these objectives, instead of mixing the assessment of practice and analysis skills in one interview, I decided to fo-cus on the practice skills, and assess students' analytical abili-ties through other assessment tools such as by assigning a quiz, or asking students to write a strategy memo or an analytical paper.

The simulated negotiation interview revolved around a two-party negotiation between the professor and the student. The students were given instructions for a negotiation scenario approximately four days before the negotiation would take place. I changed the scenario ev-ery week to minimize the chances that some students who had gone through the process could help later students prepare for the process. The scenarios I created involved one-on-one negotiations, including opportunities for value creation as well as some less-visible interests on my side. In preparing the simulation and its negotiation, I would identify places where I could act in a positional manner and push the students to use options if they had prepared them, explore in-terests when initial options were not accepted, explore how current options might be improved to transform resistance into potential ac-

ceptance, and to work with me on potential new ideas as information emerged that might also meet both sets of interests. My focus here was on pushing students to see resistance as an opportunity to discover more about interests and find new solutions, rather than as an obstacle to be pushed through with argument and persuasion. I would not resist purely for resistance's sake, but also to demonstrate the need to look for undiscovered and emerging interests.

The negotiations themselves went on for approximately twenty-five to thirty minutes, with the rest of the forty minute session dedicated to debrief. Assuming that I take at least a five minute break in between interviews, for scheduling purposes one should view this method as requiring forty-five minutes per student per interview.

Grading criteria

In terms of grading criteria, I used the following:

- **Preparation**: Have students prepared a strategy that considers my interests and theirs, possible options and alternatives (the latter including a best alternative to a negotiated agreement), and a plan for how they would like the communication to go (e.g., which issues will be dealt with and in what sequence, what questions they will ask me, what information they might present to demonstrate reciprocity, and so on)?

- **Initial search for interests**: Do students ask about my concerns, hopes, and interests at the beginning of the process? Do they present at least some of their own, to show that they are willing to share information and negotiate about interests instead of argue positions?

- **Prepared options**: Building upon students' preparation (above), when and how do they present options they have prepared beforehand? Does this presentation clearly demonstrate that they have considered my interests as well? Do they invite me to express concerns and improve the option, or do they impose it as one might impose a position? Do they have more than one option prepared?

- **Redirecting negotiations when resistance is encountered**: When resistance is encountered, do students seek to re-explore my interests to see whether there was some misunderstanding about what they were or whether new ones have been uncovered? Can they incorporate those interests into existing options, or develop new ones such that resistance becomes curiosity and willingness to continue?[3]

- **Creativity when resistance is encountered:** It is easy to be creative when the conversation is flowing well, but

can they maintain both the attitude and creativeness when there is resistance to their initial ideas and probes?

What I learned

I was quite satisfied with the outcomes of this interview assessment. The length of the interviews was sufficient for me to measure how the students were meeting the grading criteria. The focus on one negotiation as compared to multiple scenarios allowed people who were clearly slow starters to build momentum and show their skills over the duration of the negotiation. The set of skills I was testing turned out to be measurable by this scenario, and I found that they were distinctly different from what I tended to see in papers, exams, and my observations of students' negotiations. My ability to put up resistance and push the students to test their skills (in other words, to act in a manner converse to that which might typically be chosen by a student counterpart in assessed simulations) clearly distinguished some students from others.

The debriefing after these interviews was also valuable. I could use my own direct observations of how they negotiated to provide comments. Many students commented that they would actually like this exercise to come earlier in the semester because they felt they learned much from it.

Coaching Interview Assessments

I have not yet applied the third kind of interview assessment in my basic negotiation course, although I may do so in the future. However, I have used it for four years in my advanced negotiation course, which focuses on two particular aspects of conflict resolution: convening and facilitating policy dialogues, and intragroup negotiations. Unlike the other interview assessments, I conduct these coaching interviews three times during the semester.[4]

Similar to the advocates of "adventure learning,"[5] I find that simulations are useful but that they sometimes lack the intensity of real life scenarios. Students in my classes often could define the concepts, but many still struggled to employ them, especially when their counterpart did not respond automatically to their initial value-creating attempts. So, this advanced course is in part designed around forcing students to apply their negotiation thinking and practice in intensive practice.

Over the four years I have taught it, the advanced course usually has fewer students than a typical basic negotiation course, usually around a dozen. Needless to say, this smaller number has made the coaching interviews less burdensome time-wise than they might otherwise be for a larger class.

The coaching interview has two primary purposes. The first purpose is to get students to reflect on and design experiments to improve one or

two aspects of their negotiation and facilitation repertoire of skills and behaviors. The second purpose is, of course, to assess those same skills.

The first of the three coaching interviews is not assessed. One-third of the assessment occurs during the second interview and two-thirds during the third interview. This allows the students to develop their skills as reflective practitioners as the assessment increases.

Each of the three interview sessions lasts approximately forty-five minutes. During the first interview, I get the students to identify a skill that they would like to improve and then a specific experiment or strategy that they will attempt as part of improving that skill or behavior. In the second interview, I will then ask them to analyze what happened during their experiment, why those reactions or outcomes occurred, and what they learned from that experience about why things can happen and what they can do better. The second half of the second interview then focuses on designing a new strategy or experiment, either for improving the same skill or another one that they have subsequently identified as something they want to work on. The third interview follows the format of the second, with the last five minutes focusing on terminating the class and coaching relationship while (again) encouraging the students to continue to be reflective negotiation practitioners.

Grading criteria

The grading criteria for these interviews are not as specific as the ones I use for the other two interview assessment methods, in large part because each student will choose different skills that they want to work on. However, in general I am looking for two essential skills for reflective practitioners: 1) the ability to analyze potential sources for unexpected, unproductive, or effective negotiation strategies, behaviors, and surprising moments; and 2) the ability to design strategies and experiments in which to test them.

What I have learned

For this course, with its smaller numbers and greater focus on skill and reflective practice, this assessment and teaching tool is an essential component. As a learning tool, these coaching interviews are the most effective. While not all students make good use of them, those students who do commit to applying the strategies they develop report and demonstrate much greater negotiation skill afterwards. Significant improvements have been visible over the three sessions, as well as during the class negotiation sessions and in real-life negotiation scenarios where students conduct their experiments elsewhere.[6] While these outcomes are not

part of the coaching interview assessment grading criteria, they do demonstrate the value of coaching on pedagogical outcomes.

As an assessment tool, they are useful for assessing my pedagogical goal of helping students be reflective practitioners. It is clear by the third interview which students have begun to analyze their negotiation experiences on their own and which students are more capable at it.

Comparing the Interview Assessment Methods

The three assessment methods can be compared across multiple criteria as shown in Table 2. In general, I have found the simulated negotiation interview and coaching interviews to be effective. The former provides me with a real test of the students' negotiation skills, especially those that are needed when the counterpart is not initially receptive to the principled approach. Coaching interviews are quite useful in assessing students' abilities to be reflective practitioners, both in their ability to analyze real-life negotiation moments and behavior and their ability to learn from that analysis and adjust their mental models, skills, and behavior. I do not believe that the mixed scenario interview assessment was, however, effective for my purposes, as the scenarios were too short and not focused enough on skills. As such, I focus the rest of my analysis on the simulated negotiation and coaching interview assessment methods.

In terms of ability to help the students process the concepts, I have found that the coaching interview assessment is superior to the negotiation scenario one, though both work well. Of course, the coaching method has the advantage of multiple interactions and is part of a course that stresses real life negotiations among the students, as well as between the student group and the stakeholders whom they interact with as they convene a dialogue.[7] On the other hand, since each student chose different skills and behaviors that they wanted to work on, it was a bit harder to define specific grading criteria. I was primarily looking for whether or not they demonstrated the ability to be a reflective learner through their analysis of problems, creation of new possible approaches, and the testing of those approaches in thoughtfully chosen experiments. However, this course also includes a significant grading component based on my observations of how they apply skills and concepts during the negotiations I observe. This provides a third kind of assessment (observation, written, interview), with enough overlap that I feel specific negotiation skills are being covered, while also encouraging and assessing the reflective practitioner skills of the students.

The negotiation simulation interview also provides students with a chance to practice their negotiation skills directly with the instructor, and to get feedback on this right after the exercise when the

memories were fresh. Students commented that this was very useful for them. Furthermore, I found it easier to set specific grading criteria for the negotiation simulation interview, as I had a very specific set of skills and behaviors I was looking for. On the other hand, the engagement here was not as sustained as the coaching interviews, and the exercise did not try to make them into reflective learners.

Table 2: Comparing the methods

	Mixed Scenario	Simulated Negotiation	Coaching
Measures Particular Negotiation Skills	• Poor	• Good	• Fair
Measures Skills of Those with Less Writing Skill	• Yes	• Yes	• Yes
Difficulty of Grading	• Difficult: Negotiation scenarios too short for good assessment	• Easy, once specific skills have been identified	• Medium: content for each student different
Value as teaching tool	• Poor	• Good	• Excellent
Time required	• Preparation: approx 2-3 hours • Interviews: 30 minutes/student	• Preparation: approx. 4-5 hours • Interviews: 40 minutes/student	• Preparation: none • Interviews: 45-60 minutes/student
Student Reception	• Students made very few comments about this method to me • The class assessments said very little about this technique	• Generally favorable • Some would prefer assessment to come earlier, as progress report	• Generally favorable • Students feel it helps them develop specific skills • Often, students forget that they are being assessed

Other	• Effective for testing skills of people less strong in written skills • Scenarios were too short, especially the sections testing negotiation skills	• Putting up resistance to students' initial moves was very useful for discovering student's capacity to move beyond openings	• Weighting the assessment more at the end works, as students need time to learn the approach; threre is still a clear differentiation among students • Final interview serves as a good termination from the intense class

The main challenge associated with using the coaching interviews method is the time commitment that this would require when used for a larger class. While nine hours (twelve students times forty-five minutes) is acceptable for a smaller class, the same technique applied to a class of, say, thirty-six students would require twenty-seven hours over a relatively short period of time, likely within one to two weeks. Time can also play a role in the effectiveness of the negotiation simulation. I believe, and my students concurred, that doing this assessment multiple times would make it more effective as a learning tool. However, that obviously requires significantly increased time investment – e.g., a thirty-six person class would require that the instructor commit herself to almost thirty hours of assessment over a one to two week period, at least twice a semester.

Conclusion

Based on my experience with these assessment tools, I have no plans to continue my use of the mixed scenario interview method unless someone finds a better way of doing it. I will continue using the other two interview methods, in their current mode of employment: the negotiation simulation assessment interview for basic negotiation courses, and the coaching interviews for advanced negotiation courses. In the future, I may also experiment with using the coaching interviews for the basic course, perhaps around an end-of-the-semester extended simulation or some other more intensive activity.

Notes

[1] For a negotiation-specific discussion of this idea, see Honeyman and Parish (2012).
[2] For a description of the seven elements (relationship, communication, interests, options, standards, alternatives and commitments), see Patton (2005). Generally, I tend to focus on a "tai chi" *interpretation* of the seven elements that

emphasizes even more the reduced use of "pushing" – e.g., persuasion, argumentation, etc. – in favor of more "pulling" – e.g., by using questions, calling the negotiation something else (a discussion or a dialogue, for example), and so on.

[3] There was one student who had so thoroughly analyzed my possible interests that I found it impossible in the end to put up much resistance. While I was not able to test their ability to work through a blockage "in the moment," it was clear that they had anticipated possible blockages and had already formulated options to move through them. I gave that person a strong grade on this assignment.

[4] Note that a more in-depth description of the coaching interviews can be found in Chamoun-Nicolas et al. (2012).

[5] Adventure learning is the idea that students can learn more about negotiation by engaging in negotiation scenarios that are real or at least more authentic. See, e.g., Coben, Honeyman, and Press (2010), Cohn and Ebner (2010) and – in the context of assessment, Press, Ebner, and Cohn, *Assessing the Adventure*, in this volume.

[6] Note that it is possible for students to lie about the impact of the coaching on their real life negotiations. At the same time, there is no assessment for reported negotiation performance, and so no direct incentive for them to make up stories. Similarly, I have generally found that students can be quite candid about their difficulties and shortcomings, and so I generally assume that they are telling the truth.

[7] At the same time, the skills that most students choose to focus on are ones that could be covered in the basic negotiation course as well.

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