A Practitioner's Guide to Puppet Interviews

Puppet Interviewing with Young Children in Informal Learning Environments

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Fig. 1. A puppet interview with two young girls as part of the Gradient Research Project.

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Why do a puppet interview?

Puppet interviews can be helpful for getting feedback from young children in informal learning environments like libraries, museums, or afterschool programs. While puppets are a standby for interviewing children in clinical settings and are being used more frequently in some areas of qualitative research, they tend to be under-utilized in informal learning environments –natural settings for puppets because of their connections with play (Epstein *et al*, 2008).

Puppets are helpful in overcoming many of the barriers involved in interviewing young children. Children may feel shy, have competing claims on their attention, have parents who answer on their behalf, or want to please adults by saying what they think the interviewer wants to hear (Clark, 1999). Using a puppet can set a friendly tone with a child, developing rapport that helps the child feel more secure and invested in the interaction (Eder, 1990). The puppet can also disarm a parent who may otherwise answer on behalf of their child; parents tend to let their child lead the interaction with a puppet rather than speaking directly to the puppet themselves. Finally, many young children seem to treat puppets as peers, rather than as adults, speaking more comfortably with them and in longer bursts.

Puppetry Basics

The Gradient Research Project as a context for puppet interviews

Our team originally developed a puppet interview protocol for the NSF-funded Gradient research project (Gender Research on Adult-child Discussion in Informal Engineering eNvironmenTs; *GSE-RES: #1136253*). The Gradient project was designed to research the ways in which girls (ages 4-11) develop early interest in engineering, through interactions with their parents in out-of-school engineering environments. One part of this project was to recruit families at the Science Museum of Minnesota to try out an open-ended engineering activity together while we recorded their interactions.

To be eligible for the study, the family had to include at least one parent and a girl between the ages of 4 and 6 years old. The families tried two different activities, including building a tower with large foam blocks and another tower with a novel type of block – Dado Squares. Afterwards, parents filled out a survey while we interviewed their child a few feet away using a bright orange puppet. We were curious how the child would describe their experience, and whether this description would give us a window

of understanding into their engagement with the activities. We were also interested in how children were relating these activities to their prior experiences, and in the kinds of engineering-related thinking they might have been using while engaged in tower-making. The interview questions remained very similar between interviews, but we often switched the order of questions to allow them to flow more naturally in our interactions. We wanted to make the interview feel more like a conversation than a pre-set interview, so that children would feel more comfortable talking to us.

Alien Puppet Interview

The technique that we put forward in this guide is loosely based on the Alien Puppet Interview, described by Krott and Nicoladis (2005). With this method, the child talks directly to a puppet that has a plausible reason for being unaware of what the child has just experienced. For example, the puppet could be an alien from another planet where they don't have the activities the child just tried. In the Gradient project, our puppet lived in the museum, was at the low end of our target age range (4 years old) and had been taking a nap while the child was building her block towers. We hypothesized that having the interview "led" by a young puppet that had not seen the child doing the activity encouraged children to explain what they did and what they were thinking about when building with the blocks in greater detail.

Maintaining a Pleasant-Neutral Tone and Calm Energy

Throughout this guide, we talk about ways you can use a puppet in your interviews to maintain a "pleasant-neutral" tone and a calm energy, which reduces bias and creates a productive environment for interviewing. As with other interviews, you want to be friendly and non-threatening, avoiding language that may bias children towards positive or negative responses. If an adult shares a preference with a child about what kind of response they're expecting, a child may feel pressure to agree or go along with the adult--this is unhelpful if we're interested in learning more about the child's experiences. It is also important to keep a calm energy that children can mirror, so that the focus of your time together remains on the interview.

For the Gradient project, we maintained a pleasant-neutral tone by asking questions or acknowledging a child's responses with language similar to what they used. For example, if a child said, "I built a tower," the interviewer might respond with a question: "Can you show me how you built it," or a statement, "Yes, you built a tower," or with a pleasant and interested-sounding, "Okay." The interviewer would avoid saying potentially biasing things, like "That's great!" or "That must have been fun," or "It looks like a pretty cool tower," so that the child has more room to share their

interpretation of their experience. The child may have thought her experience was boring or fun, and feel proud or anxious about the tower that she built. Acknowledging a child's performance without judgment can encourage that child to share both positive and negative reflections.

In Gradient, we maintained the calm energy of our interview by limiting distractions in our data collection space and by avoiding behaviors and language that would perhaps emphasize play over conversation. We created a more comfortable, calm environment by interviewing children while sitting down next to them, in a low traffic area of the museum with their parent only a few feet away. Speaking in a slightly slow, friendly voice also helped establish a stable, pleasant atmosphere. When children wanted to play with the puppet, we waited until after the interview was concluded so that we could keep the focus on their responses. If a child became too distracted by the puppet to answer questions, we tried putting the puppet away to conduct the interview, and then brought it out again at the end if the child wanted to play with it.

"An effective child interview depends on maintaining a pleasant, neutral tone and calm energy."

Developing a character you can replicate with fidelity

You need to decide on a few key elements (which puppet to use, along with its voice, back story and physicality) that you want to incorporate in all of your puppet interviews across a project, so that you avoid biasing interview results in unpredictable ways. It is possible and even likely that your presentation of the puppet will bias children's responses (see next paragraph), but if you have replicated your puppet interview protocol with fidelity throughout the project, you can talk about possible biases more cogently in your analysis and make predictions about how your puppet presentation was likely to affect your data collection.

People intuit a lot about others from appearance, voice, and physicality. Try this thought experiment – if you were blindfolded and listening to someone, would you be able to tell if they were an adult or a child? How about if they were a boy or a girl? Whether or not people are *accurate* at guessing these traits is beside the point – people often make unexamined assumptions about others when they see or hear them speak for the first time, and this applies to a whole range of other traits, too, like where someone is

from, how well they did at school, and what they may have experienced in their life. All of this is to say that we need to be thoughtful when adopting speech patterns or ways of moving the puppet, because children will make assumptions about the puppet's character based on these choices.

Backstory

To start, your team should explore a short backstory that will explain why your puppet is a novice when it comes to the topic of your interview. Your backstory should have just a few key ideas that are: a) easy to communicate, b) easy to understand, and c) relatable. You may be tempted to put a little too much thought into this, but in most situations your puppet character does not need (and would not be improved by) an intricate backstory because you want the focus to be on the child's experience and not on the puppet's. Your backstory should include one or two key ideas about the puppet that you want to communicate consistently across your interviews, and that is all that is needed.

For the Gradient protocol, we developed a succinct backstory about our puppet. Its name was "Mookie", (or "Doodle" in later versions), and it was napping while the child built towers. It wanted to hear all about the child's experiences when it woke up, because it hadn't tried building towers before. Mookie would begin conversations by sharing that it was 4 years old and asking how old the child was. We wanted to communicate that: a) Mookie was not a specific gender, b) it was 4 years old, and c) it was not familiar with the activities because it had been asleep. We chose these elements because gender was important to our study, hence the somewhat gender-neutral names. We also wanted the puppet to be the same age or younger than the participants, because children would be less likely to assume that it knew more than them about the tower-building. Finally, we wanted a relatable and plausible explanation why the puppet was not familiar with the child's activities, so we decided that Mookie was taking a nap when the child was building her towers and so did not see anything that transpired.

Picking the Right Puppet

Once you have developed the puppet's backstory, you will want to shop around for a puppet that is right for your project. Your team should explore some basic characteristics as they review possible puppet choices, including the puppet's size, expression, texture, gender, and species (there are a host of animal, monster and alien puppets out there). See Table 1 below for an overview of what to consider when selecting a puppet, what traits we recommend, and also examples of what this looked like in the Gradient project.

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Table 1. Picking the Right Puppet

Trait	Recommendations		Examples from Gradient
Size			
	Large Puppet	Special experience – less likely to be owned by child. Puppet's expression and mouth to be more easily seen.	30 inch tall Monster Puppet.
Expression			
	Neutral Expression	"Pleasant neutral" character is receptive to positive and negative reflections.	Monster Puppet had a flat mouth, flat eyelids, and no eyebrows.
	Movable Mouth	More believable interviewing.	Monster Puppet's semi-circular mouth could open and close.
	Arm Rod	Allows us to gesture with an arm to reinforce message and believability.	Used arm to point to different areas of the child's block tower to ask more specific questions.
Texture			
	Soft	Soft perceived as friendly and inviting.	Monster Puppet covered in soft fuzz that sticks out about 2 inches.
Gender			
	Color	Many children learn to associate blues and pinks with gender at an early age.	Bright orange Monster Puppet, not strongly associated with specific gender.
	Clothing, accessories	Many young children associate clothing and accessories with specific genders.	Monster Puppet lacked clothes and accessories, to maintain idea of gender-neutrality.
	Body shape/facial features	Young children may associate body shapes, facial features with specific genders.	Monster Puppet has rectangular body shape, no eyelashes, no lips. However, lack of overt feminine characteristics (hourglass body shape, elongated eyelashes, plumper lips) may not create gender-neutrality.
Species			
	Fictional creature	Fictional characters may carry less "baggage"; negative associations or additional assumptions with animal and/or human puppets.	Monster Puppet was cartoonish; readily identifiable as a fictional creature by body shape, color, fur.

<u>Voice</u>

You may want to try out several voices before settling on one, but you'll want a voice that maintains the pleasant-neutral tone of the interview—one that can be replicated several times without a lot of deviation. For Gradient, we decided on a Grover-esque monster voice, *a la* Sesame Street. To us, this helped support key elements of our backstory – the voice may have sounded young because of this Sesame Street association, and possibly more gender neutral since it was so odd and full of vocal fry (low, vibratory rumbling).

<u>Physicality</u>

Creating a puppet that moves and speaks more realistically is one way to make its character more believable or relatable. Think of how the puppet would move if it actually had some internal structure—like a skeleton--holding it up and moving it about. Taking the time to practice moving your puppet like it has a body that obeys the same rules that yours does adds to your puppetry skill. Try avoiding bending its legs or arms the wrong way or spinning its head around in a circle.

If you are using a puppet with a movable mouth, you may want to spend some time practicing speaking with it in front of a mirror. First watch yourself as you speak - when you say certain consonants or vowels, when does your mouth open or close? Now watch the mirror as you have the puppet speak. A general rule of thumb is to close the puppet's mouth close on consonant sounds and open on vowels.

Now that you have given a lot of thought to puppet movement and puppet speech, forget about them! During your interview with the child, it is much more important that you promote a pleasant neutral tone and stay focused on the child. Fully embrace the idea that you are not a professional puppeteer, and that you can still have a very engaging experience with the child that you are interviewing even if your puppet's movement is not life-like.

"Be kind to yourself about your puppetry skills. Your main focus should still be the interview, and no one expects you to become a master puppeteer in order to do these interviews well."

When to Use the Puppet

You may have an amazing puppet, but it is important to remember that you are not invisible as soon as the puppet comes out. You can ask both the child and the puppet questions, and the child can also choose to talk to you or the puppet. If you find the child directing all of their responses to you, it may make more sense to put the puppet away.

Some children may have stronger reactions to the puppet. Some may find the experience to be incredibly rich and engaging, while others may be encouraged to be over-exuberant, extremely shy, or dismissive. You will need to make choices about when to abandon the puppet, based on how the child is reacting in the moment. In the Gradient Project, we would give shy children a chance to engage and exuberant children a chance to calm down before putting the puppet away. The interviewer might try calmly talking for a little while as the puppet, establishing boundaries and redirecting overly excited children by saying things like, "Please don't feed me any more blocks. I'm all full. What is this part of your tower for?" If a child was extremely shy, we might try asking simple questions slowly while offering a little of the puppet's backstory to see if it elicited a response. For example, the puppet might say, "I'm four. One, two, three, four. Four years old. How old are you?" If the child remained unengaged after one or two questions like this, we put the puppet away and continued the interview. Putting the puppet away did not happen instantaneously; rather it was a process so that the child could follow what was happening and get used to the idea.

Fig. 2. As a puppet interviewer, you will have to make decisions in the moment about whether to keep the puppet out or put it away.

What follows is an excerpt from one Gradient case where we had to put the puppet, named "Mookie," away. In it, you can see the interviewer establish that things

are getting too silly, and that if interaction continues to be silly, the puppet will be put away. When the child continues to be overly excited, the interviewer brings closure by giving the child a satisfying way of saying goodbye to the puppet before it is put away.

> Interviewer: "Okay Mookie, I think you are getting a little bit silly."
> Mookie: "Oh, really?"
> Interviewer: "Yes, I do. And I think if you're gonna' keep making other people feel silly, you better go back to sleep."
> Mookie: "Aw, I don't wanna' go back to sleep."
> [Child pulls on the puppet's mouth and is clearly still excited and distracted.]
> Interviewer: "So, one more pet on Mookie."
> [Child pets Mookie, then interviewer puts Mookie away.]

Getting Ready to Puppet Interview

Before launching directly into data collection, you'll want to consider the setup of your interview space and how you might develop rapport with children. You'll also want to practice your interview a few times *in situ*, to prepare yourself for possible complications.

Location Setup

If you are doing the interview in a public space at an informal institution, you may want to find a low traffic area that you can cordon off. For Gradient, it was important that the space be similar to other areas (and activities) that families might participate in at the pop-up Playdates pre-school programming. We also wanted the space to feel a little private, so we selected an open room (one without doors and with many windows) for our activities and interview. The room layout made it easy to rope off the area, but the space still felt like a part of the museum. This setting helped us maintain a calm energy, because few children wandered into the space while we conducted interviews, and the area was quieter than the main floor of the museum.

Developing Rapport

Finally, you may want to spend some relaxed time in your informal learning space interacting with children through the puppet. Building in some time for this will help you become more confident with your basic puppetry skills and help you experiment with developing rapport. At our museum, we practiced our puppetry with children at raised, carpeted areas that were created for putting puzzles together.

Children were drawn to the puppet, and we had many opportunities to practice sharing the puppet's backstory while pausing often to integrate participation from the child. It also gave us the opportunity to practice keeping our energy and in-the-moment word choice both pleasant and neutral.

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