

## **“You’re on Mute”: A Reflective Case Study of Conducting Scenario-Based Online Focus Groups on Student Privacy**

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## **Abstract**

This case study describes the design and implementation of scenario-based focus groups run by a collaborative research team consisting of eight individuals spread across eight institutions within the United States. Originally intended to be face-to-face, the research team pivoted mid-study to adapt the scenario design for the fully online environment in higher education dictated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Shifting modalities presented us with a number of challenges, in particular logistical obstacles with recruiting and the need to anticipate and prepare for using Zoom to conduct online focus groups. Our ultimate success was based in collaborative planning, clear data management, and extensive documentation.

## **Learning Outcomes**

*By the end of this case, students should be able to...*

1. Plan for online focus groups that use a reflexive governance model.
2. Identify affordances and challenges associated with using Zoom for online focus groups.
3. Develop strategies for data collection and analysis, including the necessary creation of data management documents.

## **1. Project Overview and Context**

Since the Summer of 2018, our team of eight collaborators spread across eight institutions in the United States has been conducting a multi-method research agenda into student perspectives of privacy issues associated with academic library participation in learning analytics (LA) initiatives (Jones et al., 2018). Each of the collaborators has unique expertise in the application of learning analytics, learning analytics governance, and/or scholarly expertise regarding data ethics and information privacy associated with learning analytics practices. LA is the “measurement, collection, analysis, and reporting of [student and other data] for the purposes of understanding and optimizing learning and the environments in which it occurs.” With LA, institutions are more prepared to describe (what is happening?), diagnose (why did it happen?), predict (what is likely to happen?), and prescribe (what should we do about it?) student learning by identifying factors that impede or promote success. Libraries are pursuing LA insights to evaluate the impact of library services, collections, and spaces on student learning. The success of LA depends in part on an institution’s ability to connect campus information systems—including those under the purview of libraries—to aggregate and analyze student data. But as institutions continue to mine granular data and information about student life, the risk to student privacy grows. It is unclear what rights students have in relation to the data, and when the project began, there was little evidence regarding student perceptions of LA—especially when libraries are involved.

Our collective interest in this project stems from our shared values as library and information science (LIS) practitioners and scholars. It is commonly understood—and taken as inviolable in LIS—that one’s information privacy is an instrumental value when seeking out and using information to construct one’s identity, values, and to produce speech acts that enable societal participation. Because of this, LIS advocates strongly for privacy protections regardless of context (e.g., public libraries, academic libraries, museums, archives, etc.). Mining, analyzing, and making accessible student data raises a *prima facie* privacy flag, because it changes expected flows of student information and holds the potential to affect core values in higher education, namely student autonomy and educational choice making. Upon extensively reviewing the literature, we recognized a significant gap: Students were not being consulted

about their privacy expectations and concerns, yet LA was maturing as a practice and a sociotechnical artifact for political purposes.

The research agenda we have pursued reflects a series of specific methodological choices that build on the prior phases. In the first phase (2018-2019), the team conducted literature review (Jones, Briney, et al., 2020). We used the findings from this scan to then conduct 112 semi-structured face-to-face interviews to identify themes about library participation in learning analytics and learning analytics generally with regard to privacy (Jones, Asher, et al., 2020; Jones, Perry, et al., 2019). In the second phase (2019-2020), the team deployed a survey to 2,246 undergraduate students at eight higher education institutions. Emergent codes from the first phase informed how the team developed survey questions, especially around data types, sources, and practices. The findings from these first two phases carried over to the third phase (2020-2021), focusing on specific applications or themes of LA use that had arisen previously. Phase three was initially designed as a series of scenario-based focus groups with students to explore possible applications of learning analytics that respect and break expectations of privacy. When the COVID-19 pandemic took hold for an extended period of time, we were forced to elongate our time frame out to May, 2022 and change our research methods to lean heavily on online tools and designs. At the time writing, we have conducted our online focus groups and are midway through analytical coding.

The following case study focuses on our ongoing experiences during the third phase of our research agenda, with special focus paid to how the transition to focus groups facilitated by online tools opened up opportunities and created notable hurdles. In the following sections, we begin by introducing readers to the phase's research design and highlight design evolutions taken to accommodate for online focus groups. Next, we describe some of the research practicalities, including logistical hurdles, associated with working on a distributed research team and in preparation for participants who, like ourselves, had transitioned to online education. We follow this part with a reflective discussion about the pain points of our method. Finally, we conclude the case study with a critical evaluation of our experiences during phase three, with a focus on its successes and lessons learned that are transferable to other qualitative researchers seeking practical advice on conducting online focus groups (but, hopefully, in non-pandemic times).

- The research team consists of eight collaborators at various higher education institutions in the United States.
- The research team has been investigating student privacy issues in relation to learning analytics since 2018.
- Learning analytics, or the collection and analysis of student data has by and large not included students' privacy perceptions and expectation in the design of related technologies.
- The final phase of the project, which is highlighted herein, focuses on focus groups—which were supposed to be conducted face-to-face but the COVID-19 pandemic forced the team to move to online focus groups.

## **2. Research Design**

As we have found in our research, higher education institutions have largely left out students in the decision making processes around LA. As a result, edTech and administrators make assumptions about student privacy interests and develop poorly informed governance mechanisms. The third phase of our research agenda sought to turn this approach to LA on its head. We adopted a “futurizing” approach to LA by developing three sociotechnical scenarios rooted in real-life applications of LA. Using strategic design, we engaged students in

conversations about near-term and long-term futurized applications of LA that raised privacy issues in unique ways. By futurizing LA with students, we were able to practice anticipatory, reflexive governance; Miller and Bennett (2008) explain:

[Reflexive governance] entails the capacity to reflect on and systematically inquire into and manage current and future technologies, based on a thorough understanding of technological forms of life. It means assessing the kinds of technological societies we are building, and the political economies that are building them. It means deliberating in depth about the future of technological societies and the potential for human meaning and wellbeing within them. It means identifying not only what gadgets might arise but also how gadgets intersect in society, with one another and with people, how people identify with, make use of, oppose, reject, apply, transform, or ignore various gadgets. (p. 602)

Scenario designs have long been used among Science and Technology Studies researchers in concert with a reflexive governance interest. The driving motivation in using scenarios is to move users or subjects of a particular technology from the downstream, the point of application, to the upstream, the point of innovation and design. Scenario design centers the users, giving them a legitimate voice in the design and a sense of responsibility regarding its effects and consequences. Keeler, Bernstein, and Selin (2019) write:

Indeed, the challenge is how to raise forth the human and the cultural when encountering decisions about technological innovation, so often shrouded in and dominated by a calculus of speed, risk, and machinery. Scenario research methods in particular offer a means of surfacing moralities and values often underlying technological change yet crucially do so in a present-focused modality. That is, scenarios are crafted in the present to reimagine technological futures so that, in the present, different choices can be made. (p. 257)

With the right structure, scenarios enable participants to think through design opportunities and dead ends so that the sociotechnical systems respect their individual interests and values, along with those they share with the various communities in which they are embedded. The aim is to establish consensual (re)designs of the scenarios among participants, to shape them for an agreeable, sustainable future, as an act of reflexive governance. In the following section we discuss specific details of running the scenario-based focus groups online, especially after having our face-to-face intentions derailed by COVID-19.

- The student perspective, especially regarding privacy, has not been forefronted in the design of learning analytics tools.
- Our research design adopted a reflexive governance perspective and implemented scenarios to reposition the student perspective in the “upstream” development of plausible futurized applications of learning analytics.
- The futurization of LA enabled students to conceptually design certain styles of tools and practices in accordance with their privacy perspectives and expectations.

### **3. Research Practicalities**

We constructed three scenarios for this study. To develop the scenarios, each team member was tasked with a structured scenario ideation assignment. The team reviewed and discussed the outputs of these assignments. The team then conducted virtual cards and whiteboard mapping exercises to explore (1) the relation of the scenario to academic libraries, (2) the comprehensibility of the scenario, and (3) the benefit-to-privacy risk ratio. The team was split

into three groups, with each group taking one of three targeted scenarios. Each group improved the scenario by composing a brief literature that further grounded it in real applications of LA. Additionally, for each scenario the groups outlined: the justifications around, goals for, possible benefits of, and plausible privacy harms. The final scenarios are:

1. A scenario on embedding library resources and services in the learning management system (Jones et al., 2021a),
2. a scenario on library data warehouses (Jones et al., 2021b),
3. and a scenario on location tracking (Jones et al., 2021c).

Each scenario contains the following sections:

- Introductory remarks, logistics, ground rules for participation, and an outline of the scenario's structure;
- a description of the scenario, including data sources and types, intended goals, and rationale for the technology's use;
- a trust theme, which includes a general question, a question that evokes responses to targeted alterations to the technology, and a guided consensus question;
- and in mirror fashion to the trust theme, a privacy theme, which again includes a general question, a question that evokes responses to targeted alterations to the technology, and a guided consensus question.

Seven of the eight team members participated in data collection for this phase of our study. Participating team members conducted each scenario once at their respective institution, resulting in twenty-one focus groups. One hundred and sixteen undergraduate students participated. Scenarios averaged five participants; the maximum number of participants was eight (one focus group), while the minimum number of participants was three (one focus group). Focus groups were scheduled for an hour and averaged forty-four minutes in duration.

As the research team commenced planning for face-to-face focus groups, we tracked the ongoing progression of COVID-19 in the United States and how each team member's respective institution was restricting on-campus gatherings. It became clear that the 2020-2021 academic year would most likely remain conducted online which had direct consequences for the design of phase three. Recruitment strategies and initial protocol planning had commenced in the summer months of 2021, and fully transitioning to virtual methods became a challenging task—especially for research members who had already prepared for a face-to-face design and who had no experience conducting online focus groups. The first challenge was to the timeline, which had to be adjusted for logistical purposes and subsequently needed funder approval; we applied for and received a one-year no-cost extension. The second challenge concerned familiarizing ourselves with the literature addressing online focus groups. Very little research exists about this method (see Coulson, 2015; Liamputtong, 2011; McDaniel & Suffern, 2020; Stancanelli, 2010, 2010; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017), and much of it attends to technology that is out-of-date and required us to map some of the principles or instructions to our platform of choice: Zoom. Moreover, conducting *any* kind of research during a global pandemic raises unique concerns. Some helpful literature had emerged that enabled us to be responsive to these new needs (see Jowett, 2020; Marques et al., 2021; Teti et al., 2020; Tremblay et al., 2021; Vindrola-Padros et al., 2020). After familiarizing ourselves with the literature and developing a team strategy, we began to put our plans into action.

As previously mentioned, our target sample was undergraduate students. After each of our institution's institutional research board (IRB) reviewed and exempted our study, we began recruitment. First, we obtained student emails from the correct offices at our respective

institutions, such as the office of institutional research. We asked these offices for a sample of 3,000 emails for degree-seeking undergraduate students over the age of 18. Further, we asked that the sample be stratified by class (e.g., freshmen/first years to seniors). We had no aims to generalize findings by demographics or otherwise establish demographic findings, so we did not ask for the stratification to be by major demographic markers (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender identification, sexual preference). Next, we used these emails to start our recruitment campaign using individualized messages to students supported by the Qualtrics survey system. Each researcher created a version of the standard, IRB-approved survey and customized it to their needs. This survey included the consent form and three time slots the researcher had chosen for which a participant could indicate their availability to participate, which allowed for flexibility for both the researcher and the recruited students. We loaded in the sample email lists and then scheduled direct emails to each student. The email provided a description of the study and the survey's link. While Qualtrics is a sophisticated system to use, it is also possible to just send an email directly to students. However, it did enable researchers to easily track whether or not students had received and completed the survey, as well as automate follow-up messages to remind them of the research opportunity. At some institutions, additional samples were required due to low response rates. As with the first round, researchers loaded these email lists into Qualtrics and reran the recruitment process. Once recruitment was complete and response rates provided enough students to invite to focus groups, the researchers emailed students directly about participating in a focus group at their preferred time. We determined that a minimum of 5 students would be optimal to run an effective focus group; we invited 8-12 students for each focus group to allow for no-shows or drop-outs.

Each researcher ran their own focus groups and included either another researcher from the project or a research assistant or both. The additional personnel had three logistical tasks: pseudonymizing participants before recording began for greater anonymity, taking notes, and assisting participants if they encountered technical difficulties during the focus group. They were also available to take over running the focus group in case the lead researcher encountered technical difficulties. Focus groups were organized around a slide deck (e.g., a PowerPoint presentation) that formed the structure of the session and provided a way to succinctly present information and keep track of time. The initial slides provided an overview of the research team present, and focus group purpose and logistics. Good flow of conversation is key to focus group success and we laid out ground rules to ensure fair and friendly communication, including that all voices and a variety of viewpoints are valuable, that hurtful language would not be allowed, and that the focus group leader would work to ensure robust participation by all.

We conducted focus groups using the Zoom video conferencing software. Given that our research subject is student privacy, we were highly sensitive to possible privacy problems, in addition to the technical issues that could emerge. We attempted (successfully) to limit these issues by developing a comprehensive checklist protocol to ensure that all the settings were appropriate and consistent across groups. We developed the protocol by looking at every Zoom setting and determining the best options for ensuring a smooth process and enhancing privacy protections (Jones et al., 2021d). Some of these choices included: not allowing students to rename themselves, using the waiting room, muting participants as they joined, deactivating chat, instructing students and researchers to blur their backgrounds, and, among other things, recording to the computer rather than the cloud so we could maintain control of the recordings.

Students entered their focus group Zoom rooms at or before their assigned time, and Zoom placed them immediately in the waiting room. When the research team was ready, they admitted students and collaborators began renaming participants (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2). We began recording about fifteen minutes into each session after covering the session's

logistics, technology checks (e.g., webcam, audio, microphone), and basic descriptive information. Non-lead researchers turned off their cameras once recording began for less distraction. All research personnel present recorded each focus group as backups and to provide formatting options; Zoom formatted lead researcher recordings differently from collaborator recordings for reasons unknown. There are a number of ways that screen recordings can display in Zoom. We found that setting recordings to minimize the shared screen, maximize participant view, and highlighting the speaker provided the clearest recording of which participant was speaking at any one time.

We sent focus group recordings to AutomaticSync, a professional transcription service, to render the audio into analyzable text. One researcher was responsible for loading all text, audio, video, and other research documents (e.g., focus group notes) into MAXQDA, a qualitative analysis software package. Three phases of coding then commenced. First, transcripts were auto-coded by speakers using MAXQDA's (2021a) focus group transcripts feature. Second, team members and research assistants conducted sectional coding according to the standard structure (i.e., its sections) of each focus group. Finally, the team adopted and modified its code book from phase one of the research agenda (Jones, Asher, et al., 2019), supplementing it with new codes based on qualitative impressions from the focus groups and on word frequency analyses. Currently, researchers are in the process of applying codes based on coding assignments, and auditing the code applications of their peers. We are applying codes to full sentences to capture relevant data without undercoding (e.g., at the word level) or overcoding (e.g., at the paragraph level).

- Scenario development was a collaborative process.
- The global COVID-19 pandemic required a full transition to online data collection, which was hampered by limited literature on online focus groups.
- Recruitment was a multi-faceted process facilitated by the Qualtrics survey system.
- Data collection required particular attention to the Zoom web conferencing system in order to maximize data integrity.
- MAXQDA data analysis software supported researchers as they conducted multiple analysis phases.

#### **4. Method in Action**

Even given the complete move to an online and previously unknown research method, a number of successes are notable related to data management, data integrity, and collaboration. The research team is fortunate to have two academic library practitioners as collaborators who have expertise in data management: Dr. Kristin A. Briney and Abigail Goblen. From the outset of the collaboration, both of these researchers have developed documentation, metadata, and organization standards that have set high—but doable—expectations for the team to manage its work in various shared document systems (e.g., Google Drive) and in MAXQDA. This level of detail is necessary when collaborators are spread across eight institutions and the number and type of documents are numerous. When combined with this infrastructure, the standard data created by Zoom increased the data's integrity. The research team is confident that all data is secure, documented, and was created as it should be to enable coding. Finally, we would add that for some collaborators, the distributed research environment required by COVID-19 could impair successful research. This was not the case for us. We thrived in part because of our commitment to accurate data management and willingness to extensively document our research practices.

With regard to the research itself, we were pleasantly surprised by the transition to Zoom. While it was the case that it required the team to investigate and prepare for significant logistical

handling, these logistics were not all that more difficult than face-to-face focus groups—just different. Further, by conducting focus groups virtually, researchers from different sites were able to observe and take notes on sessions they would not have had the opportunity to do in person. While researchers would have seen each other's transcripts, and thanks to the virtual format also a clear video recording of each participant, the direct exposure to students at other institutions helped to give the researchers a full understanding of the variety of student experiences, especially outside of their local university context. This directly benefited the development of the code book by enabling a richer discussion and a clearer, shared understanding of its contents and possible applications. While we are not completely done with coding, the structure of the scenarios have left a positive impression on us. They seemed to have been comprehensible to students and supported participant-to-participant exchanges.

The detailed planning that went into the research design was well worth the effort as it prepared us for the challenges of actually conducting the research. We had a few moments where we had to reconcile differences in platforms and software. For example, Zoom looks different depending on the computer platform (i.e. PC, OS), desktop or web version, and by institutional setup. We also found in creating the scenario slide decks that we used a variety of software options (i.e., PowerPoint, Google Slides, Keynote) that we needed to work around for sharing. Logistical hurdles included recruitment problems and having some participants miss their timeslots, requiring rescheduling several sessions; including some where participants had already shown up. This resulted in additional rounds of participant solicitation and developing a detailed researcher scheduling matrix. Keeping detailed records of participants, research schedules, and contact records allowed us to mitigate some of these issues but it did mean that administrative tasks took up significant time. The research team also had to adjust the minimum number of participants in each session as we had instances of participants drop off after the focus group began. Given the number of sessions that had to be rescheduled it perhaps would have been easier to set up an alternate session at the outset so at least the researchers could account for that time.

We will also report that MAXQDA, while highly advanced in functionality and usability in comparison with its peers, presented administrative struggles. The application enables researchers to collaborate on a project, and MAXQDA has provided significant documentation to support collaborative teams (MAXQDA, 2021b; Rädiker & Morgenstern-Einenkel, 2021), but it requires an extensive merging process that takes time and requires one lead to handle that process. File versioning must be accounted for. Merging integrity checks must be done. And merging problems often required rolling back to previous versions and starting over. We created a process that managed all of this and ensured high fidelity of our MAXQDA files, but it was not without struggle and lost time. All that said, given our team's experience with other popular qualitative data analysis software packages, we would still choose MAXQDA for our software needs again.

- The creation of an extensive data infrastructure with clear data management requirements enabled collaborative research efforts at a distance.
- Regardless of the very real concerns, virtual focus groups were successful and held unique opportunities, such as being able to observe collaborator sessions live and recorded.
- Detailed planning and documentation in support of online focus groups led to successes.
- Issues with the chosen qualitative data analysis software cost a lead researcher time due to a complex file merging procedure.



## 5. Practical Lessons Learned

One of the most crucial lessons the research team learned was the benefit of taking time to plan out the research study in detail. This includes the scenario topics, as well as the logistics of conducting them. Documentation for both was extensive and understood by the entire research team. Refining the scenarios through multiple exercises with the team allowed for a shared understanding of the details and goals of each scenario and aided in managing the focus groups as well as developing the code book. The detailed instructions for Zoom settings, among other sources of documentation, ensured that the focus groups were completed without issue and in a consistent manner across all sites. It also allowed the team to clearly identify improvements to the process should we use this model of research again.

As with all types of research methods, individuals have personal biases and preferences for one method in comparison with another. Some of the research team struggled with the forced adaptation to virtual focus groups; others were excited about the challenge and potential opportunities. It was useful for the team to express their positions and provide support when needed. The team confronted the challenge as just that: a team. After conducting the focus groups and reflecting on their experiences, all team members now have a clearer, less biased perception of online focus groups. They are neither good nor bad in comparison with their face-to-face equivalents. They simply have different limitations, opportunities, and needs that must be addressed in design.

A distributed research team of eight members can lead to logistical headaches and misunderstandings. But, our team has a multi-year history of success because of its willingness to be collaborative and transparent about individual and team needs. We all recognize that research can be messy and flexibility is necessary, but we also understand that there are discrete activities for which we have the appropriate expertise. We often willingly broke into sub teams to accomplish specific tasks according to our ability to lead, our interests, and our time availability. There is no one way to accomplish this type of success; it takes time to develop team synergy. However, always working toward this synergy allows large, distributed research teams to successfully make major adaptations in their work—such is in our case when we were faced with a global pandemic.

- Extensive planning and project tracking are paramount and lead to project success.
- Biases and preferences for comparable methods need to be acknowledged and sympathized to allow for learning and growth.
- Team synergy allows distributed research teams to effectively pivot when faced with unforeseen hurdles.

## 6. Conclusion

In this case study, we have described the design of scenario-based focus groups run by a collaborative research team consisting of eight individuals spread across eight institutions within the United States. These focus groups were intended to be face-to-face, but COVID-19 restrictions forced them to be virtual—and forced the research team to make major adaptations to its design by ‘learning on-the-fly’. Our research team benefited from extensive documentation, including those that addressed research protocols, instructions on how to use certain technologies necessary for virtual focus groups, among other things, tracking spreadsheets for researcher progress and data auditing.

As discussed, there is very little research addressing how to run online focus groups, and even less yet about how to conduct research during a pandemic. Yet, our experiences documented herein and combined with the extant literature provide useful insights for other researchers. While we conducted scenarios for our focus groups, the case study's reflective findings are applicable to seemingly any online focus group design. And we recommend that researchers fully weigh the potentials and pitfalls associated with *both* face-to-face and online focus groups before choosing one over the other. Speaking for the research team, we believe that these experiences have expanded our methodological toolbox and we welcome future opportunities to run online focus groups.

Among other findings discussed above, readers should take away from this case study one major learning. Virtual focus groups—especially those conducted among large, distributed research teams—require detail-oriented work supported with clear, unambiguous documentation. Sometimes writing documentation such as we suggest for experienced researchers seems elementary or unnecessary, but that would be a mistaken assumption. The moving parts associated with online focus groups are many—keeping all researchers moving forward at the same speed, with the same information, toward the same goals is of greatest importance.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What are three advantages and disadvantages of online focus groups?
2. What are some circumstances that might point to online focus groups as a better choice than in-person focus groups?
3. While recording online focus groups is straightforward, what are some of the potential pitfalls and how can they be planned for?
4. Using a slide deck is one way to organize an online focus group. What would be some other ways to approach it?
5. How might the research question point to choosing online focus groups or how the focus groups are organized? Compare this case study with another.

### **Multiple Choice Quiz Questions**

1. When recording the Zoom sessions the researchers:
  - a. Saved the recording to the cloud for shared access
  - b. Saved the recording locally on the principal researchers machine
  - c. Saved the recording locally on all present researchers machines - CORRECT
2. To protect participant privacy, the researchers used the following settings:
  - a. Gave participants pseudonyms - CORRECT
  - b. Uploaded the recorded transcript to Zoom's servers
  - c. Allowed screen sharing
3. When scheduling focus groups, in the future researchers would:
  - a. Conduct one more focus group than planned

- b. Set an alternative day so researchers could schedule around it - CORRECT
  - c. Conduct the focus groups on the same day
4. When designing focus groups, other researchers should heed the suggestion to:
- a. Clearly and comprehensively develop useful documentation - CORRECT
  - b. Assume face-to-face focus groups are better than online focus groups
  - c. Ignore the extant literature on virtual focus groups

### Further Reading

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### Web Resources

1. Data Doubles: <https://datadoubles.org>
2. Prioritizing Privacy: <https://prioritizingprivacy.org>
3. Datafied Classroom: <https://datafiedclassroom.org>
4. Student Privacy Compass: <https://studentprivacycompass.org>
5. EPIC Student Privacy Project: <https://epic.org/privacy/student>

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