Focus Group Research in the Academic Library: An Overview of the Methodology

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Abstract: Through the use of focus groups, academic librarians can discover what students really think, feel, need, and want. Equipped with this knowledge, librarians will be better positioned to design and deliver effective programs, improve services, and shape the development of facilities to better meet the needs of current and future users. Concerned about the efficacy of various library programs and initiatives at Valparaiso University (Valparaiso, Indiana, USA), two public services librarians conducted a series of focus groups with undergraduate students to gain a better understanding of their perceptions of the library. This paper provides an overview of the focus group methodology employed in this study.
Keywords: Focus groups, qualitative research, academic libraries, undergraduate students, user needs

1. Introduction

Academic libraries provide resources and services designed primarily to meet the research needs of students. Sometimes librarians make decisions about resource allocation and service provision without knowing if these resources and services will actually meet student needs. Learning more about how and why students use the library and which resources and services have real value will help librarians determine if they are investing their time, energy, and money effectively.

Two public services librarians at a small, private university conducted a series of focus groups with undergraduate students in an effort to discover their perceptions of the library. The purpose of this paper is to describe the focus group methodology employed in this study. This paper outlines the steps necessary to design and implement a focus group study, from the preliminary planning process to reporting results. The description of the focus group methodology as applied in this study may serve as a template for librarians to

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use in their own efforts to assess the efficacy of various programs and initiatives.

2. Focus Group Research

Focus groups, often associated with the marketing of consumer products and services, are used to gather data to understand the attitudes, beliefs, concerns, behaviors, and preferences of particular groups of people. Focus groups are about listening: investigators listen to group participants, and participants listen to—and respond to—one another. The social nature of the focus group stimulates participants to tell stories and share experiences in ways that reveal their insights and perceptions that are unlikely to be obtained through other research methods. This practice of group interviewing takes advantage of the interaction of members to stimulate the thinking of one another and enrich the contributions of the participants.

A focus group is a semi-structured group interview with a small number of participants. These participants are carefully selected by those conducting the research in order to assemble a group of people who have certain characteristics in common or share a concern about a particular issue. Focus group interviews are held in settings in which participants can speak freely about the topic. Each group is conducted by a moderator who asks participants a series of carefully sequenced, open-ended questions, and engages participants in conversation about a particular topic. Rather than having the direction of the discussion wholly determined by the moderator, a well-conducted focus group allows participants to drive the conversation, and to some degree to determine what is actually discussed.

The focus group technique is especially suitable for the study of student behaviors in higher education. In academic libraries, focus group research has significant potential as a method for gathering qualitative data to help librarians and library administrators understand how students use the library. Qualitative data will help librarians identify student needs and determine the extent to which the library is meeting those needs. Focus groups can also be a useful tool for librarians to make decisions about allocation of resources and the provision of services, as well as to evaluate the effectiveness of library programs designed to support student learning. In addition to the new knowledge that focus groups may generate, focus groups can have a significant by-product: the creation of good will among users. Asking students what they want and need can help strengthen their perception of the library as an organization that listens to and understands their needs.

3. Literature Review

Information about the origin and development of focus group research can be found in the classic article by Merton and Kendall, "The Focused Interview" (1946), and in a book by Merton, Fiske, and Kendall, *The Focused Interview: A Manual of Problems and Procedures* (1956). The genesis of the framework of the focused interview by Merton and the development of focus group research as a social science method during the last century is thoroughly covered in *The Search for a Method: Focus Groups and the Development of Mass Communication Research* (Morrison, 1998).

There are a number of marketing and social science texts that explain how to conduct focus group research, including *The Handbook for Focus Group Research* (Greenbaum, 1998), *Moderating Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Group Facilitation* (Greenbaum, 2000), and *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Some guides are intended for particular audiences, including those working in the social sciences (Morgan, 1988), education and psychology (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996), and marketing (Edmunds, 1999*). Using Focus Groups in Research* (Litoselliti, 2003) is a succinct, accessible guide for undergraduate and graduate students. *Doing Focus Groups* (Barbour, 2007) is part of a qualitative research how-to series for practitioners in an array of fields. *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice* (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007) places focus group research within a theoretical context of mainstream social science.

Studies in which focus groups have been used to gather some or all of the needed data are prevalent in the literature of library and information science (LIS). Although few of these articles provide detailed information about *how* the focus groups were conducted, there are some publications in the LIS literature that specifically address the method (Connaway, 1996; Glitz, 1997; Johnson, 1992; Kerslake & Goulding, 1996; Radford, 2008; Young, 1993). *Focus Groups for Libraries and Librarians* (Glitz, 1998) appears to be the only book-length work that specifically addresses conducting focus group research in libraries; *Usage and Usability Assessment: Library Practices and Concerns* (Covey, 2002) addresses focus group research as one of several approaches to conducting user and usage studies.

4. Context

The focus groups described in this paper were conducted at Valparaiso University (Valparaiso, Indiana, USA), a four-year, independent Lutheran institution located sixty miles southeast of Chicago. Valparaiso University offers more than seventy undergraduate programs in five colleges—Arts & Sciences, Business Administration, Engineering, Nursing, and Christ College (the honors college), as well as more than forty master's degree programs. There are approximately 3,000 undergraduates and more than 1,000 graduate and law students. Enrollment includes students from most U.S. states and more than fifty countries; the majority of students come from outside of Indiana.

5. Analysis

5.1. Focus Group Methodology—Introduction

Concerned about the efficacy of various library programs and initiatives at Valparaiso University, we (the aforementioned public services librarians) conducted a series of focus groups with undergraduate students to gain a better understanding of their perceptions of the library.

5.2. Rationale

We wanted to know to what extent library at Valparaiso University met the needs of undergraduate students, and were curious about how students perceived the library, librarians, resources, and services. We hoped to gain a better understanding of student perceptions and needs in order to assess what the library was doing right, what areas needed improvement, what existing programs and practices might be abandoned, and what sorts of services should be offered that were not currently available.

A broad review of the library literature suggested that conducting a survey has been the customary method employed by librarians to learn about the perceptions of library clientele. However, we did not believe that the use of a survey could yield the depth of understanding of student perceptions that we sought. We determined that focus group research would be the best method for discovering if the library was truly meeting the needs of undergraduate students. Unfortunately, neither librarian had any experience conducting focus groups. Thus, the purpose of the project evolved from a desire to discover student perceptions to a need to learn how to conduct focus group research.

5.3. Planning

Having identified the purpose of the study, we began to design the process. We relied mainly on what is generally thought to be the “bible” of focus group research, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*, a text by Krueger and Casey (2000). The authors outline a step-by-step approach and provide sound advice, making the process practicable—even for novice researchers. Good planning is essential to conducting successful focus group research. We met regularly throughout the process to review what had been accomplished, determine what the next step would be, and decide who would take responsibility for each new task.

5.4. Institutional Review Board Approval

In order to be able to conduct this study and share the findings, it was necessary to have the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Valparaiso University. The IRB process served us well, as many of the documents needed for review and approval were parts of the process that would need to be completed eventually. The IRB process made it necessary to draft a summary of the proposed research objectives, write an outline of procedures for data collection, determine the specific eligibility requirements for subjects, and provide a plan for how we would recruit participants. The IRB also required both oral and written informed consent statements, as well as the questioning instrument to be used in the focus group sessions. These components will be described in more detail below. Thus, in fulfilling the IRB requirements, several of the most important pieces of the focus group process were in place well in advance of conducting the focus group sessions.

5.5. Consultation with Others

Early in the process, we introduced our project at a library faculty meeting and asked colleagues what sorts of information they would like to learn from students. Our colleagues were enthusiastic about the project; they indicated that they would welcome feedback about any aspect of our broad array of resources and services. We also consulted with a member of the teaching faculty familiar with social science research, two library student employees (one in reference, the other in circulation), and an undergraduate student who did not work in the library. In the meetings, we explained the intent of the project, reviewed our tentative plans, and explained why we chose undergraduate students as the target group. We were looking for direction in terms of content (what we should be asking) and practice (how we should go about conducting these groups). We reviewed our proposed questioning instrument. We also sought feedback on our overall plan. Their suggestions proved invaluable. The students, for example, suggested the best days, times, and locations for our focus groups; they also provided useful feedback on what kinds of food to serve that would attract and please the participants.

5.6. Funding and Support

The Dean of Library Services paid for meals for participants, incidental expenses, the purchase of the recording and transcription equipment, as well as costs for the transcription of three of the four sessions. We did not seek any funding for this project outside of the library.

5.7. Equipment

As neither of us had conducted research of this type, we asked for advice from those who had, especially with regard to the mechanics of recording and transcribing. Although we were encouraged to explore digital recording and the use of voice recognition software, we found that our needs could not be met by this technology. We purchased a microcassette recorder/transcriber, as well as an omni-directional microphone.

5.8. Compensation and Incentives

Compensation is an essential part of conducting focus groups. There are a variety of compensation options. Sometimes cash or gift cards are used. We did not have the budget to compensate participants for their time, but we were given funds to feed them. Providing food plays two roles: not only is it a form of compensation, it also helps to establish a comfortable environment. We decided to order lunch from a bakery/café with a reputation for having good, healthy food. Ordering from this restaurant worked very well—both in terms of recruiting participants and in terms of a satisfying form of compensation. We had our recruits select from the menu in advance, thus each participant was selecting what he or she wanted to eat and drink, rather than choosing from what we might have elected to provide. This created a sense of obligation to attend the session as each participant had a pre-ordered meal waiting for him or her.

5.9. Logistics and Arrangements

Conversations with students during the planning process were helpful in determining what days, dates, and times would be most convenient for undergraduates. The pilot group was conducted on a Sunday, with lunch at noon, followed by the focus group session. The second session was held on a Sunday evening (dinner provided); the third on a Saturday (lunch), and the fourth on a Sunday (lunch).

Selecting the right location to conduct the focus group sessions is very important; the location needs to be easily accessible, comfortable, and private.

The space should have an atmosphere in which the participants can feel at ease; we wanted to ensure that the environment we selected would be conducive to open discussion. Following the advice of the students, we used a group study room in the library for three of the four sessions. The study room—clean, bright, and the right size—has a dozen or so chairs around a fairly large table. The arrangement is ideal for a focus group.

When planning focus groups, it can be difficult to determine how many sessions should be held. Often, multiple focus groups are conducted on the same topic until a point of saturation is reached. Saturation is a key concept in focus group research; saturation is the point at which the investigators are no longer hearing new information—and thus have likely heard the full range of ideas on the topic. Ideally, researchers would want to continue to conduct sessions until no new information is heard. However, the limited availability of resources generally determines the number of sessions conducted.

5.10. Screening of Participants

The concept of homogeneity is central to selecting participants in focus group research. Focus groups should be comprised of six to eight participants who have similarities to one another that are useful to the researcher. For our study, we recruited undergraduate students with junior or senior standing, of traditional undergraduate age (under 25 years of age), enrolled in a particular college, and not employed in the Christopher Center (more specifically, not employed by Library Services, Information Technology, the Writing Center, or by the café located in the library.

5.11. Recruitment

Litoselliti (2003) pointed out that social scientists rely on "advertising, face-to-face contact, key informants, existing social networks and word of mouth" (p. 37). We employed these same strategies to recruit participants. We used fliers and table cards within the Christopher Center to publicize the project; these outreach materials directed students to complete a screening application available at the circulations and reference desks. We also asked our student employees at circulation and reference to refer students to us who met the criteria. We then sent the student a personal e-mail invitation indicating that he/she was referred to us, explaining the project, and asking if he/she might be interested in participating. As Valparaiso University is small and many students know one another, we had on several occasions a couple of student employees canvas the building for likely prospects. Finally, as the student senate had shown an ongoing interest in the library (especially in advocating for an expansion of library hours), we asked members of the student senate to recruit participants. This last approach was not ideal as our focus was on obtaining feedback from students who used the library, rather than any student enrolled at the university.

5.12. Scheduling

Although we had successfully recruited a sufficient number of volunteers who met our criteria, we soon discovered that it was very difficult to find a two-hour time slot during which six to eight of these volunteers were available to meet at the same time.

After consulting with undergraduate students as part of the overall planning process, we identified the days of the week and the times of day that were likely to work well for undergraduates. Students were generally available during the weekend because they were less likely to have other commitments, unless they planned to be away from campus. Sometimes it is the availability of resources that can limit the number of focus groups conducted; in our case it was a shortage of qualified participants who could all meet at the same day and time.

For the pilot project, we were only able to recruit one group of sufficient size who could all meet the same day and time. For the sessions held during the following semester, we had hoped to have one group from each of the five colleges at Valparaiso University. However, we were unable to recruit a sufficient number from business or engineering; we conducted three sessions with students from arts and sciences, the honors college, and nursing.

5.13. Informed Consent

As part of the Institutional Review Board process, we were required to develop an informed consent statement—essentially a device in which the researchers provide information to participants about the process, and in turn the participants grant permission to proceed. We developed two informed consent statements: one was written, to be presented to (and signed by) the participants upon arrival at the focus group meeting; the other was an oral statement that became part of the script for the session.

The written statement explained the purpose of the study, how participants were selected, the mechanics of the group, how the data would be handled, and what we planned to do with the results. The statement emphasized the voluntary nature of participation. The statement described the benefits to the participants ("You will receive a meal during your time spent in the focus group."), as well as the risks ("There are no known risks to you.") The recording secretary asked each participant to sign the form as they came into the room.

The oral statement, incorporated into the opening script read by the moderator, addressed the confidentiality issue. We explained that we were recording the session because we did not want to miss any of the participant's comments, and that the recordings would be destroyed when the project was completed. We also informed them that there may be a published report of the sessions, and that although comments made by participants might appear in the report, speakers would not be identified.

5.14. Developing the Questioning Instrument

A questioning instrument is an integral component of focus group research. Questioning instruments have several sections. Krueger and Casey (2000) identified five: opening, introductory, transition, key, and ending. Based on this format, we developed a battery of questions. Krueger and Casey explained that good questions are usually short; address one issue per question; sound conversational; and are written in plain language, avoiding jargon and acronyms. Good questions are open-ended, which invites the participants to speak at length on the topic. For example, a question might open with a word such as "explain" or "describe," or a phrase such as "could you illustrate" or "tell us about a time when." We hoped to develop a questioning instrument that would help the moderator shape the conversation, and yet have the discussion driven by the student participants.

In addition to simply asking a series of questions, there are a number of alternative methods for generating discussion. For example, Krueger and Casey (2000) suggested asking the participants to assign ratings (e.g. excellent, good, fair, poor) to products or services. Barbour (2007) discussed the use of stimulus materials (such as a newspaper clipping, magazine article, photograph, video clip, drawing, or cartoon) during the focus group to motivate discussion, as well as the use of complementary written exercises.

Rather than ask a series of questions about circulation, reference, library instruction, and so forth, we developed and distributed a report card to the participants and asked them to assign a grade to our resources and various service units. We listed ten "subjects" on the report card—the library building, the library staff, reference help, library instruction, circulation, interlibrary loan, library resources, the web site, the catalogue, and the writing center. We asked the participants to take a minute or two and assign each subject a grade: A, B, C, D, F, or N/A. The grades themselves were not of primary importance; the report card was used as a vehicle to generate discussion.

Once the report cards were completed, the moderator asked the participants to identify the subjects that received high grades—and to explain why. They were then asked about the subjects that received low grades—and to explain why. The moderator intentionally did not ask about specific subjects, but instead asked about high and low grades. This approach allowed the moderator to give some direction to the discussion without controlling exactly which subjects the participants discussed. In this way we were able to discover what was of interest to them—not to us. The report card approach proved to be very successful as it generated animated discussion among participants and revealed insightful observations for the researchers. As a final point, the moderator asked the participants if there was another subject for which they would like to assign a grade; this was an attempt to open up avenues of conversation that had not been anticipated.

At the end of each session, the recorder summarized the key points from the discussion and then the moderator asked the participants how well the key points reflected what was said during the session. The moderator also asked if there was anything that should have talked about, but had not been discussed.

5.15. Developing the Script

In addition to developing the informed consent statement and a questioning instrument, we created a script for the session itself. A script ensures that the participants will each receive the same information and be asked the same questions in the same order at every session. The script, read by the moderator, prompted the moderator and recorder to introduce themselves, thank the attendees, explain why they were invited to participate, and describe what was expected of them. We told them we would ask a series of questions, and that there were no right or wrong answers to these questions. Emphasizing that it was important that we get a realistic picture of the library, we asked them to be frank and honest. We encouraged them to share their point of view even if it differed from what others had said. We told them that we were as interested in negative comments as well as positive comments—and that sometimes negative comments could be more helpful.

5.16. Role of the Moderator

The moderator poses questions, encourages input from all participants, and keeps the discussion on track. The moderator explains the process, asks questions, listens to responses, and prompts the speakers for additional information. In an effort to see that everyone has an opportunity to participate, he may direct questions to specific members of the group. He should ask questions in a way that does not influence the comments that participants make. He encourages frankness and is careful not to make judgments about the responses. The moderator's tone and body language should not communicate approval or disapproval. Weare acted as moderator for all four sessions.

5.17. Role of the Recorder

The recorder operates the recording equipment, takes notes, and observes the dynamics of the group and any nonverbal behaviour unlikely to be captured on audiotape. Having a recorder take notes during the process proved to be useful when analyzing the transcripts; it helped us to recall the tone with which information was communicated. Byrum acted as recorder for all four sessions.

It is important that both the moderator and the recorder conduct themselves in a manner that lets the participants know that their feedback is valued and appreciated. Our respect for the participants, coupled with our enthusiasm for the project, appeared to help the participants feel comfortable.

5.18. The Focus Group Sessions

Each of the sessions we conducted required a three-hour time commitment. Thirty minutes were allotted for the meal and ninety minutes for the focus group interview. The remaining time was for set-up and wrap-up.

On the day of the session, we gathered all of the materials: script, informed consent forms, recorder, cassette tapes, pads, pens, name cards, and so forth. While the moderator set-up the room, the recorder picked up the meals. Upon arrival, our guests were greeted, introduced to one another, and given their meals. During the meal, we were careful to keep our conversation on topics *other than the library*; we did not want the participants to provide any information about the topic that would not be captured on tape.

The moderator, recorder, and participants were seated around a table to facilitate discussion; we wanted all of the participants to be able to see one another. After the participants finished their meals, the discussion began following the script and the questioning instrument outlined above.

The participants were forthright and provided us with information we would have had difficulty obtaining using other methods. They spoke freely with one another and did not seem to be inhibited by the moderator, recorder, or recording equipment. The participants appeared to have enjoyed the opportunity to share their views.

5.19. Post-Session Discussion

Following the completion of the discussion, the recording equipment was turned off and the moderator and recorder asked the participants for feedback about the focus group process. Their feedback gave us confidence that we were on track.

After the sessions, we had a number of students thank us for listening to them. Glitz (1997) noted that "the act of consulting users and listening to their needs has proved to be a useful exercise in public relations by those who have used them" (p. 389). Focus groups not only yield valuable insights, but they also convey the message that the organization is interested in listening to its clients. The public relations aspect of focus groups may mean that libraries and librarians we have to change some things based on what they learn. One student told us, "We'll be watching to see what you do with this."

5.20. Transcription

The transcription of focus group interviews—even by a professional—can be a lengthy process. A typical formula suggests that it takes 6-8 hours transcription time per hour of focus group discussion. There appears to be two schools of thought regarding transcription. In the first, researchers must transcribe their own interviews as there is no better way to know the data. In the second, the audiotapes are transcribed by an outside transcriptionist. For the pilot study we transcribed the session ourselves. For the three later sessions, we paid a student enrolled in a local college of court reporting to do the transcription for us. The cost was reasonable.

5.21. Analysis of the Transcripts

Although there are formal methods for coding and analysing transcripts from qualitative research, our analysis proved to be relatively simple; the perceptions shared by the students regarding a broad range of issues was generally clear and easy to comprehend despite the large amount of data.

After the tapes of each session were transcribed, we identified and coded significant statements and grouped the statements into categories. Not unexpectedly, these categories corresponded roughly with the categories we had created on the report card—circulation, reference, library instruction, and so forth. Some of these categories produced little discussion, while other topics—not listed on the report card—generated considerable discussion. In examining the transcripts, we looked at how frequently a particular subject was discussed, how often something was said, and how often participants made the same point. More importantly, we looked for those places in the discussion where responses had been especially enthusiastic or passionate.

Although we looked at frequency of particular responses, it is important to remember that focus groups generate qualitative data, not quantitative data; thus we were careful not to treat qualitative data as if it was quantitative. Focus groups are not surveys; the responses of participants should not be tallied. It is important not to generalize, and not to make statements about populations. The intent is to discover, learn, and understand. It is essential to be open to discovering what was truly communicated by the participants, rather than what was expected or hoped for.

5.22. Reporting the Findings

Our study generated useful information about undergraduate student perceptions of the library that may aid librarians and staff in evaluating the effectiveness of library services. We shared our findings with the librarians and staff at Valparaiso University in the hope that our efforts at assessment may influence policy formation.

Conclusion

With good planning, focus groups are fairly easy to implement and relatively inexpensive when compared to other assessment methods. This detailed narrative of how we conducted our study may provide other academic librarians with an understanding of the components of focus group research design, as well other important considerations for planning and conducting focus groups. For a more detailed understanding of how to design and implement focus groups, readers are encouraged to consult the texts identified in the literature review.

Focus group research can be a valuable tool for assessment. For academic librarians, studies such as this may yield significant insight into user perceptions of the building and staff, as well as the many resources and services provided by libraries. Armed with the inside knowledge of what students really think, feel, need, and want, librarians will be better positioned to manage and improve traditional services, design and deliver programs that really make a difference to our students, as well as to shape the development of facilities designed to meet the needs of future users.

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