

Focus Groups as a form of Student Evaluation of Teaching

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Abstract

This paper will fill a gap in the scholarship of teaching and learning on focus groups as a form of student evaluation of teaching. This 'gap' may be due to the fact that focus groups are seen as an unofficial form of evaluation in a system which emphasises Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs) and the Course Evaluation Instrument (CEI). They are also seen as an adjunct to these more formal types of evaluation, to gain deeper understandings of student opinions. Despite the unofficial and adjunct status of focus groups, this form of student evaluation needs to be theorised and considered in the literature. Staff who request focus groups, often do so after checking their SETs and CEI scores. They often take the negative comments to heart, without placing enough emphasis on the positives. The amount of perceived negative comments from large course groups, sometimes up to 300 students per study period, often overwhelms academic staff and they find it difficult to establish a starting point from which to begin to improve their course or their teaching. Focus groups provide the opportunity to delve deeper into the reasons why students may be satisfied or dissatisfied with a particular course. Focus groups also place some measure of accountability upon students to justify their evaluations of teaching and courses. For this reason, focus groups are a valuable form of evaluation, thus needing to be theorised and considered seriously in the literature. Until now, this has not been the case.

Keywords: focus; group; evaluation.

Introduction

This paper will fill a gap in the scholarship of teaching and learning on focus groups as a form of student evaluation of teaching. This 'gap' may be due to focus groups being seen as an unofficial form of evaluation in a system which emphasises Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs) and the Course Evaluation Instrument (CEI). They are often seen as an adjunct to these more formal types of evaluation, being used to gain deeper understandings of student opinions. Despite the adjunct status of focus groups, this form of student evaluation needs to be theorised and considered in the literature. Thus, this paper seeks to re-establish the value and use of focus groups as a valid form of evaluation of teaching and courses, being a particularly powerful method of evaluation when used in conjunction with the more quantitative forms.

Academic staff who request focus groups, often do so after checking their SETs and CEI scores. They often take the negative comments to heart, without placing enough emphasis on the positives. The negative comments sometimes overwhelm academic staff and they find it difficult to establish a starting point from which to begin to improve their course or their teaching. Focus groups provide the opportunity to delve deeper into the reasons why students may be satisfied or dissatisfied with a particular course. Focus groups also place some measure of accountability upon students to justify their evaluations of teaching and courses. For this reason, focus groups are a valuable form of evaluation, thus needing to be theorised and considered seriously in the literature. Until now, this has not been the case.

The idea for this paper began out of my day-to-day role as an Academic Developer at the University of South Australia. Part of my role is to examine the Course Evaluation Instrument (CEI) and Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) results from various courses and programs. Many of the issues that I grapple with are in terms of translating internally delivered courses to externally

delivered with lots of online components. Very often, conversations develop in this process around pedagogy and various teaching and learning arrangements that can improve the overall CEI and SET scores. Conversations with academic staff have led me towards an understanding of the angst that is often associated with evaluations of teaching. If focus groups can act as a support for teaching staff in this process, then they are a highly valuable resource and should not be discounted.

Definitions of focus groups

There are a range of definitions of focus groups in circulation and most of them indicate similar characteristics. For example, Kitzinger and Barbour (in Webb and Kevern, 2001, p.800), define focus groups as a collective activity “exploring a specific set of issues”, the main goal of which is “the active encouragement of group interaction among participants”. They go on to elaborate upon the role of the researcher/moderator or facilitator of the discussion, whose role is basically to “encourag(ing) participants to talk to one another: asking questions, exchanging anecdotes, and commenting on each others’ experiences and points of view” (Kitzinger and Barbour, in Webb and Kevern, 2001, p.800). Webb and Kevern (2001, p.800) also point to the work of Krueger (1994) who argues that the focus group has a significant level of face validity “because what participants say can be confirmed, reinforced or contradicted within the group discussion” (Krueger, in Webb and Kevern, 2001, p.800).

Balch and Mertens (1999, p.267) have similar definitions to the aforementioned points, however, they also add that focus groups generally involve a small group of participants, somewhere between 6 and 12. The discussion is directed through the use of a checklist of topics to be covered in the session, which is used to guide the discussion but not to circumscribe the limits of conversation. “This flexibility allows the moderator to probe and clarify implied or unclear meanings. It allows participants to raise important issues and nuances which researchers often do not foresee” (Balch and Mertens, 1999, p.267).

In a focus group, relatively homogeneous groups of participants have the opportunity to stimulate, support and build on each other’s ideas on the topic. They discuss the topic in their own framework and terms. As they become more sensitised to the topic and to each other, participants stimulate each other to take the discussion beyond the rhetorical or habitual. They ‘open up’ and may reveal important material that would not have emerged in direct questioning. For all of these reasons – group interaction, spontaneity and openness, peer support, descriptive depth, and opportunity for unanticipated issues to emerge – focus groups seemed well suited to understanding unmet and unanticipated communication needs among people . . . (Balch and Mertens, 1999, p.267).

Macquarie University argue along much the same lines, and add that “it is often useful to organise for the facilitation of such groups to be conducted by a third party whose role is to develop a trusting relationship with the group, and ask questions and elicit discussion” (Macquarie University, 2006, p.2).

Overall, a broad-based definition of focus group evaluation is as follows:

- i. collective activity
- ii. exploring a specific set of issues (evaluation of teaching/course)
- iii. active encouragement of group interaction
- iv. facilitator driven (in a loose sense), best done by a third party
- v. allows responses to be validated, reinforced and contradicted on-the-spot
- vi. small group of participants (6 to 12)

- vii. build on group interaction which stimulates ideas and further thinking

Such a definition gets to the heart of the value of conducting focus group evaluations. From conversations with staff, it is these very characteristics which are so useful in focus group evaluations. The fact that focus groups are a collective activity (i), means that a number of small groups of students (vi) can be brought together to discuss evaluation of teaching or a course (ii). In such a session, with active encouragement of group interaction (iii) provided by a facilitator (iv), ideas can be stimulated and deeper thinking about issues can take place (vii), allowing responses to be validated, reinforced and contradicted (v) while the focus group is in session.

Academic staff experiences of formal evaluation processes

My initial experiences with the CEI and SETs were quite interesting and highly revealing of the psychological state of many of the teaching staff who I would encounter in the ensuing months. They would read the CEI and SET results and then the individualised comments from students. Most of the time, there is usually a striking imbalance between positive and negative results, overwhelmingly in favour of positive results. Often, there would be 10 positive comments about an individual's teaching or the overall course for every one negative comment. And yet, teaching staff would take the negative comments to heart. They would read such positive comments as ". . . is the best teacher I've ever had" and "Thanks to . . ., I have a greater understanding of this topic than ever before", and so on. Then they may read a rare comment such as "I couldn't understand a word . . . said" or ". . . needs to learn more about the subject before he teaches it" and so on. Despite the overwhelming (in most cases) imbalance in favour of positive comments by students, many of the teaching staff are quite devastated by the negative comments they receive.

They complain that their own roles are increasingly regulated, and yet students are not held accountable in any way for the comments they make about teachers in these instruments as all responses are anonymous. This is especially devastating for many of the very experienced teaching staff, who may have been teaching for decades and yet to read such comments has a very negative effect on morale. One of the problems is that student evaluations of teaching and courses are linked in so many ways to promotion structures within universities, and increasingly, to tertiary institution rankings from rankings agencies. A solution to the non-accountability of students in comments about teachers and courses, is to engage students in a focus group to go deeper into the reasons why such comments are made.

One cannot be sure that in a focus group, the students who made the negative comments in the CEI or SETs will be the students who are in the focus group. Nevertheless, with a well-worded guide (a guide to questioning) and a skilful focus group facilitator who can draw responses out of the students, many of the fears and apprehensions that staff feel about the CEI and SET comments are allayed to some degree within the focus group session. Often, staff have the opportunity to probe and draw out the reasoning behind negative comments, or at least understand the overall picture that the negative comments are in a small minority. The psychological benefits of such a process are incalculable for teaching staff which allows them to then reflect again on the CEIs and SETs to engage with the data as good evaluation data is meant to be used, to improve the course at the next iteration. Thus, the use of focus groups, hand-in-hand with reflection upon CEI and SET data, can produce useful evidence of teaching and course quality.

Theorisation of focus group evaluation

Interestingly, focus groups as a form of evaluation are under-theorised in the academic development literature. They are utilised often in the health care setting, in health education, and in marketing education. However, the teaching and learning literature and the Scholarship of Teaching and

Learning (SoTL) literature somewhat ignores the use of focus groups. This theorisation will take the reader through the debate between qualitative and quantitative forms of evaluation, definitions of focus groups, and the advantages and disadvantages of the focus group method.

Qualitative vs quantitative forms of evaluation

There has been a long-running debate in relation to evaluation methods on the relative merits of qualitative versus quantitative methods of evaluation.

“On the one hand, quantitative methods claim to be objective and to support generalisable conclusions. On the other, qualitative methods lay claim to flexibility, sensitivity and meaningful conclusions about specific problems. Quantitative evaluators challenged their colleagues on the ground of reliability, sample validity and subjectivity, whilst qualitative practitioners responded in kind with challenges concerning relevance, reductionism and the neglect of alternative world views” (Oliver, 2000, p.2).

There are a number of other considerations when using qualitative methods such as focus groups. For example, having a facilitator who does not teach in the course under evaluation is considered to provide a professional approach producing less biased outcomes. Another issue, pointed out by Oliver (2000, p.6), is that while academic teaching staff have content expertise in their area of teaching, many do not have experience or expertise in carrying out more qualitative forms of evaluation.

A qualitative approach to evaluation of teaching leads to an ‘understanding’, rather than a ‘measuring’ of student perceptions. “Good qualitative research goes beyond reporting what people say to *why* they are saying it” (Lechner, 2001). It is just such understandings that focus groups can tease out.

Aims of focus group evaluation

The aim of evaluation by focus groups is to achieve a variety of opinion and not just a consensus. This can be very valuable, as issues that may arise from analysis of CEI and SET data can be clarified, and an interactive environment where ideas are placed into the environment and confirmed or negated can be stimulated.

The Griffith Institute for Higher Education (GIHE) indicate a number of uses of focus group evaluations and these are enlightening:

- focussing on a particular aspect or aspects of your teaching;
- teasing out issues in areas suggested by previous evaluations to be in need of improvement;
- assessing the impact of changes made to teaching or a course (e.g., in response to improvements suggested in previous evaluations);
- evaluating a new course or an innovation in teaching; or
- triangulation of evaluative data (GIHE, n.d.).

Advantages of focus group evaluation

Focus groups can be used in a number of ways depending on what academic staff are seeking. They can be conducted during the running of a course in order to evaluate and improve the course in the immediate, formative sense. Alternatively, they can be used to clarify information that comes out of

CEIs and SETs at the end of the study period. Focus groups have many advantages and should not be discounted as a useful form of student evaluation of teaching, particularly when based on and created from comments made by students in CEIs and SETs. It is these comments that staff can seek to clarify through the use of focus groups.

As pointed out earlier in this paper, another advantage of focus groups is that they produce very rich, deep data and this is one of the great advantages of the method. It is the interaction between members of the focus group that produces such richness of data. With participants bouncing ideas off each other, comments being confirmed, contradicted, and reflected upon within the actual staging of the focus group, the richness of the data comes from the dynamic interaction between participants. As Twinn (1998, p.654) points out, in order to achieve such a situation, there must be a rapport built up within the group, and the facilitator needs to build an atmosphere of trust and comfort so that they will feel free to express their opinions and ideas openly and often, especially on sensitive issues. "In addition, the use of a group approach reduces pressures on participants to respond to every item or issue, consequently reducing anxiety and making the process of interviewing more enjoyable" (Twinn, 1998, p.655). Only when this type of environment is in place can the full benefit of the richness of the feedback be appreciated.

Additionally, focus groups allow for the gaining of multiple perspectives on issues to do with an individual's or team's teaching, as well as being able to drill down into meanings in great depth that other forms of evaluation do not allow (Loriz & Foster, in GIHE, n.d.). Within a focus group, students feel that their opinions matter, therefore they are more willing to open up about matters. "Participation in focus groups can also give students a greater awareness and understanding of issues related to teaching and learning (Armstrong & Conrad, in GIHE, n.d.) and a greater sense of satisfaction with a course" (Hamilton, et al; Tse, in GIHE, n.d.).

Disadvantages of focus group evaluation

A few important points to keep in mind when thinking about using focus groups are important to bring up as some concerns have been raised in the literature. For example, "Yelland and Gifford (in Twinn, 1998, p.654) argue that focus groups were developed particularly for use with Anglo-Celtic populations and raise questions about the appropriateness of focus groups as a method of data collection in cross-cultural research". This may be an issue to watch out for if any of your students who are participating in focus groups are international students. However, my experience is that within focus groups, international students very much enjoy the freedom to express their views openly, and often are the ones who step forward to participate when the call to take part goes out. Nevertheless, just like in any other teaching and learning situation, cultural sensitivity must be taken into account when conducting focus groups.

Another important issue pointed out in the literature is the requirement for a skilled moderator/facilitator to conduct the focus group. It can be a great disadvantage to have an unskilled facilitator who is unable to put the group at ease, and in the end, is unable to capitalise on the group interaction, helping to keep the flow of ideas going through the interaction of the group, and therefore unable to elicit the rich data that is so valuable.

As Straw & Smith (Twinn, 1998, p.655) point out, the focus group facilitator needs to ensure equal participation across the group, and keeping the 'conversation' on track by focusing the group on the necessary discussion points. Another disadvantage is that some students may feel threatened by certain occurrences that may arise within the discussion and may clam up. In addition, some students may feel threatened at the outset or on the defensive or unwilling to provide constructive criticism of the teaching staff as they may see it as criticism rather than constructive feedback.

Conclusion

Overall, despite the disadvantages of focus groups, of which there are not many, focus groups are a valuable form of student evaluation of the teaching process. It has been demonstrated in this paper that there are great benefits for teaching staff in using focus groups as a method of evaluation.

From my experience, teaching staff often feel quite devastated at the negative comments they receive from students in their CEIs and SETs even if they are greatly outnumbered by positive comments. As some teachers have mentioned, the negative comments really cut to the core and are sometimes even couched in somewhat abusive language. This is one of the major disadvantages of the formal methods of evaluation, that lack of accountability on students for the feedback they provide. A well facilitated focus group can go somewhat towards making students accountable for their comments, at least for those that participate in the group sessions. Those that turn up may also be able to shed light on the negative comments that other students have made. As such, a well-conducted focus group can act as a great source of support for teaching staff. For this reason alone, focus groups are highly valuable and should be used more often. There are other advantages which have been pointed out in this paper, as well.

Nevertheless, despite the many psychological and pedagogical advantages of using focus groups, the method remains under-researched and perhaps, to some extent, under-valued. It is hoped that this paper has gone some of the way towards placing focus groups back in the spotlight as a useful method to obtain student feedback on teaching in the tertiary education sector.

Notes on contributor

Dr Robert Muller is a Senior Lecturer in Academic Development at the Magill Campus of the University of South Australia. Robert's specialisations are in the areas of assessment, academic integrity, and evaluation, and he assists academic staff with a wide range of issues around course and assessment design.

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