The Use of Focus Group Methodology in Education: Some Theoretical and Practical Considerations, 5 (3)

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The Use of Focus Group Methodology in Education: Some Theoretical and Practical Considerations, 5(3)

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Abstract

While often considered to be the domain of market research, focus groups are also a useful way for promoting an empowering, action-oriented form of research in education. Drawing upon recent reviews of focus group methodology and examples of how focus group interviews have been used by researchers and educators, this article provides practical recommendations for making focus groups an effective tool in education.

Introduction

The 1990s have seen a rapid reversal of social scientists' attitudes towards focus groups. As Berg (1995) notes, focus groups have traditionally been dismissed as part of the "vulgar world of marketing research"," however it is a method that is increasingly being appreciated for the advantages it offers to researchers in specific data collection situations (Morgan, 1993; Gibbs, 1997; Barbour & Kitzinger, 1998).

As Barbour and Kitzinger (1998) stress, focus groups are becoming an "established part of the methodological tool kit" within the social sciences; how researchers adopt them remains a matter of "crucial concern." Whether focus groups will simply be "added to a shopping list of potential methods" or be deployed in a more "challenging" manner than is promoted by traditional market research practices depends exclusively on the ability to critically examine this method and its potential within a given discipline (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1998). It is therefore, best to approach focus groups with a healthy dose of scepticism, constantly questioning issues of practice, politics, and theory, while still attempting to establish innovative ways to use this method to challenge traditional channels of knowledge production.

This article provides a critical examination of the potential for the use of focus groups within education in several ways. First, focus groups are contextualized within a particular historical background and as a qualitative method. Second, drawing upon the recent literature within the education and focus group research literature, this article presents an overview of some situations where focus groups would be appropriate. Finally, some basic practical issues about conducting a focus group are addressed.

Literature Review

A variety of definitions exist within the literature regarding focus groups (see Lewis, 1995; Gibbs, 1997; Marczak & Sewell, 1998). Broadly speaking, a focus group is defined as a small gathering of individuals[1] who have a common interest or characteristic, assembled by a moderator, who uses the group and its interactions as a way to gain information about a particular issue.

As Kruger and Casey (2000) note, the purpose of focus groups is to promote a comfortable atmosphere of disclosure in which people can share their ideas, experiences, and attitudes about a topic. Participants "influence and are influenced," while researchers play various roles, including that of moderator, listener, observer, and eventually inductive analyst (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

The anthropological tradition of researchers collecting data around tribal campfires closely parallels modern-day focus groups (Berg, 1995). Nevertheless, Frey and Fontana (1993) and Glitz (1998) suggest that the earliest recorded study of the focus group appeared in a 1926 article by Bogardus, who used the findings of small discussion groups with schoolboys to test his social distance model (Bogardus, 1926). The next real academic attention that focus groups received was in Merton and his colleagues' evaluation of audience responses to radio programs during the 1940s (Glitz, 1998). Out of these research pursuits, the first book dedicated to focus group methodology was produced (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1956). Despite this work, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the social science community largely ignored focus groups as a legitimate research practice[2] (Lewis, 1995; Berg, 1995; Krueger & Casey, 2000). Instead, focus group methodology found a devoted following in the realm of market research (Morgan, 1988). In fact, it was not until the 1980s and 1990s that focus groups became an increasingly popular data collection method (Morgan, 1993; Berg, 1995; Glitz, 1998), particularly in the areas of medical sociology, nursing, and health sciences (Catteral & Maclaran, 1997).

A number of key characteristics led to the increased use of focus groups in the last twenty years. Generally, as is the case for most qualitative methods, it is the focus group's ability to access the "knowledge, ideas, story-telling, self-presentation, and linguistic exchanges within a given cultural context" (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1998, p. 5) that makes it a refreshing challenge to traditional quantitative approaches. Quantitative work (such as the collection of survey data) through a process of "measurement, experimentation, variables, and operationalization, transfers the original 'voices' of its research subjects into statistical data, mathematical relations, or other abstract parameters," leaving little understanding of the context in which particular social practices occur (Schratz, 1993, p. 1). In contrast, qualitative methods such as focus groups, participant observation, case studies, and individual interviews pay more attention to the original voices of actors in their everyday life, allowing researchers the possibility of observing and

presenting a broader view of social reality within their research practices (Schratz, 1993; Hoepfl, 1997). Stated simply, focus groups help to capture those experiences that cannot be "meaningfully expressed by numbers[3]" (Berg, 1995, p. 3).

Specifically, focus groups are unique in their explicit use of group interaction to produce data (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1998). As a method, focus groups are based on two fundamental assumptions. The first is that individuals can provide a rich source of information about a topic. The second is that the collective and individual responses encouraged by the focus group setting will generate material that differs from other methods[4] (Glitz, 1998).

The key elements that contribute to focus groups being an effective tool for social scientists are the levels of "synergy, snowballing, stimulation, and spontaneity" that a group dynamic can generate (Catterall & Maclaran, 1997). For instance, within a focus group discussion, a comment may encourage a train of thought in another, people may develop new ideas and ways of connecting their personal stories to specific situations, and it is research participants who primarily guide the flow and direction of questioning (Panyan, Hillman, & Liggett, 1997; Glitz, 1998).

Additionally, researchers describe the data they attain from focus groups as "extremely rich" and "high quality" (Ashar & Lane, 1991). In a recent contribution to the focus group literature, Krueger and Casey (2000) suggest that focus groups effectively tap into the multiple realities of people's experiences and often provide researchers with "tiny glimpses of the world" they would not normally experience. They describe the many stories they have heard from research as "funny," "uplifting," and "haunting"(Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Along with the benefits focus groups offer to researchers, it has also been suggested that research subjects are empowered as part of this research process. This sense of empowerment comes from being valued as experts (Byron, 1995), having the opportunity to work collaboratively with researchers and interact with other participants (Gibbs, 1997), and having the experience of being able to speak in public and articulate their views (Panyan, Hillman, & Liggett, 1997).

The group dynamics and the benefits that focus groups offer to researcher and research participants illustrate some of the major reasons why educational researchers should consider using focus groups as a strategy for examining the social world. Nevertheless, focus groups are not suitable for every data collection situation. Focus groups are not designed to provide statistical projections, to help participants reach a consensus on a given issue, to resolve personnel issues, or to change people's attitudes (Glitz, 1998; Krueger & Casey, 2000). There are also some topics in which a focus group setting is not the best approach. Topics such as sexuality or abuse can elicit some powerful responses from focus group members that may be better addressed in a forum where confidentiality and privacy are easier to maintain (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). However, by exploring some of the uses of focus groups within the educational research, and the suggestions offered in recent guides on focus groups, a clearer understanding of the situations where focus groups may be appropriate is offered.

Focus Groups in Education

In the last ten years, researchers at secondary and post-secondary levels have relied on focus groups to achieve various objectives, including:

- The development of learning tools that will appeal to students' interests and needs (James, Rienzo, & Frazee, 1997);
- The evaluation of students' knowledge or attitudes about curriculum issues (Bauchner, Boardman, & Palmer, 1996; Pugsley, 1996);
- The formulation of new marketing strategies for educational programs (Ashar & Lane, 1993);
- The enhancement of survey results in education research (Panyan, Hillman, & Liggett, 1997).

Focus groups have been used to explore topics as diverse as nutrition, AIDS, sexual education, and technology. Based on a critical examination of these studies, and the suggestions offered within current compilations on the practical and theoretical issues associated with focus groups (Morgan, 1993; Barbour & Kitzinger, 1998; Krueger & Casey, 2000), recommendations for when a focus group may be used in an educational setting can be formulated. This list is not intended to be mutually exclusive or inclusive; rather, it is designed to encourage researchers and educators to think creatively about situations where focus groups might be beneficial. It is also provided to promote some reflection regarding how accessing the feelings, attitudes, and beliefs expressed by students, teachers, parents, and administrators in focus groups can prove to be an enlightening and productive process.

Decision-making

Some sources caution against using focus group research for decision-making (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). However, Krueger and Casey (2000) clarify this warning by noting that, while decisions should never be made within an actual focus group itself, the input received from a focus group can be extremely useful when trying to make decisions before, during, or after a particular planning process, such as for a needs assessment, a pilot test, and or an outcome evaluation. For instance, Ashar and Lane (1993) describe their success in using focus groups to develop an effective marketing plan for incoming students at an American college. Accordingly, schools (or researchers) hoping to make decisions about how to allocate funds, or attempting to create policies that reflect the desires and ideas of students, parents, and/or staff, might find conducting a series of focus groups to be a fruitful endeavour.

The development, evaluation, and/or assessment, of an educational program, tool, or curriculum

Determining the needs, evaluating programs, and determining the effectiveness of a particular curriculum topic are some of the possibilities that may be well suited to a focus group study. As an example, James, Rienzo, and Frazee (1997) supply a detailed description of how the student input generated from a series of focus group studies provided the basis for creating instructional videos and developing learning units on nutritional issues. As well, Pugsley (1996) recounts some of the benefits and difficulties she encountered when using focus groups to discuss their

sexual health curriculum with a group of British adolescents. Thus, if researchers or educators want to create learning tools that appeal to students and teachers, identify the sort of information young people are attaining and retaining from their classes, or measure how teachers feel about curriculum sensitive issues, focus groups may be a helpful departure point.

Fill in gaps or complement quantitative and qualitative research methods

As was mentioned earlier, focus groups have the potential to generate data that may not surface in individual interviews or survey research. For instance, Michell (1998) highlights the different sort of data on peer group structures that she generated by employing both interviews and focus groups, suggesting that the combined application of these methods allowed for a more detailed understanding of her research topic. As well, Panyan, Hillman, & Liggett (1997) use both questionnaires and focus groups to provide a complete picture for evaluating and revising a teacher education program.

Those researchers, or educators, who wish to enrich the results from interview or survey questions might gain a great deal of information from asking the same questions within a focus group setting. Additionally, focus groups can be of tremendous value if investigators are trying to generate new hypotheses, study the relevance of particular concepts, or understand new terminology from the perspective of various groups within a school community (parents, teachers, administrators, and students).

This brief review of education studies illustrates some of the different ways that focus groups can be applied in an educational setting. Below are guidelines and recommendations about the necessary steps that educators and researchers need to take in order to plan focus group research and make constructive use of the results.

A Practical Guide to Conducting Focus Group Research

Like any other research method, focus groups require careful planning and are a labour-intensive process. Fortunately, a variety of specific and detailed "how to" guides exist to assist researchers embarking on a focus group project: Krueger (1988), Morgan (1988), and Krueger and Casey (2000). As well, both Morgan (1993) and Barbour and Kitzinger (1998) bring together a comprehensive collection of articles written by academics from a wide range of disciplines, which address some of the more theoretical issues associated with the focus group methodology. Arguably, one of the most useful tools for educators comes from Einsiedel, Brown, and Ross (1996). They provided a step-by-step guide to conducting a focus group from project conceptualization to the application of project results. Following are some practical objectives based on the insights of the available resources. Brief attention is also given to the challenges associated with achieving these goals.

1. Focus on the research purpose:

Researchers have to consider the overall objective as well as the specific objectives of their research. This can be determined by answering two questions: what is the research for, and who

is using the results? Respecting participants and collecting and presenting quality data should remain at the forefront of all focus group studies.

Challenges: A focus group should never be conducted just for the sake of conducting a focus group. As Cunningham-Burley, Kerr, and Purvis (1998) stress, the power differentials between funders, researchers, and research participants have to be interrogated when determining if focus groups will be a useful method or simply a form of tokenism – giving the appearance of listening but not really hearing. As well, focus groups should not be conducted when the research requires statistical information (Morgan & Krueger, 1993; Glitz, 1998; Krueger & Casey, 2000). Additionally, while focus groups may be used by researchers or participants to facilitate the process of change, this should only occur after focus groups are complete. Focus groups should not be explicitly designed to educate, resolve conflicts, or encourage consensus among participants.

2. Select a skilled moderator:

A successful moderator will possess the ability to listen, probe, and direct group interaction. The moderator must feel confident and comfortable managing focus group participants, whether they are students, parents, teachers, or administrators. Also, the participants must feel at ease in disclosing specific information to a particular moderator.

Challenges: Problems that challenge effective moderation can occur if moderators are too close to the topic, are not prepared to really listen carefully, cannot maintain an energy within the focus group, or are not successful at drawing out responses from all focus group participants (Krueger, 1993).

3. Design an effective interview guide:
In any interview situation, a researcher is expected to word, order, and present their research questions to respondents in a way that promotes discussion in a non-threatening manner. Questions should be unstructured and open-ended in order to ensure that as much data as possible can be collected.

Challenges: Threats to creating an effective interview guide occur if there are too many questions, if the concepts or language is too formal, if questions are unclear, and if participants are not encouraged to add their own input at the end of the research process with a closing inquiry such as "did I miss anything?" (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

4. Select and recruit appropriate participants:

A general rule is to strive for some homogeneity in order to ensure that the participants will be comfortable speaking with each other. If participants are familiar with each other outside of the research situation, this will, in some cases, facilitate more open responses and, in other cases, may close off a dialogue. The researcher must aim to ensure that they consider which situation will best ensure an environment in which respondents feel at ease. This includes looking carefully at the power hierarchies within particular groups (among individual participants and

also between participants and the researcher) that contributed to promoting or suppressing various voices in the research process.

Challenges: Dilemmas with selecting and recruiting appropriate participants can occur if researchers have to go through a gatekeeper (such as a school principal) to access their target population (Pugsley, 1996; Barbour & Kitzinger, 1998).

5. Analyze and use the results:

How focus group results are interpreted depends upon the audience for whom it is intended. Regardless of whether a researcher is relying on a content analysis program using direct quotes from participants or is simply drawing out major themes, researchers are looking for core insights, common phrases and words, a specific mood or tone to group interaction, and other non-verbal clues from their focus group results.

Challenges: Some of the major issues associated with analyzing focus group findings include neglect in recognizing group interactions within the data, the attempts to quantify the data, and the inability for researchers to recognize some of the limitations within their results (Wilkinson, 1998).
Applying these practical recommendations and considering such challenges is an essential first step for those educators and researchers hoping to conduct a successful focus group.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to mount a convincing case for the importance of the focus group for enriching education research. In reviewing this method, situations were considered where it would be appropriate to use focus groups in educational settings. The core objectives of focus groups were addressed, and the problems associated with achieving these aims were reviewed. The purpose was to provide a clearer understanding of both the theoretical and practical concerns associated with focus group methodology. It is hoped that this discussion has stimulated interest in the use of focus groups within education. This article also issues a challenge to readers: widen the scope of this debate by continually seeking creative and productive ways to incorporate the use of the focus groups within the realm of educational research. When used correctly, focus groups can be an empowering process for both researchers and participants. Focus groups may also generate rich data that can facilitate decision-making and provide useful information for the development, evaluation, and modification of curriculum, learning tools, and programs – information that might not be accessible from other research methods.

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