Face-to-Face in Writing:
My First Attempt at Conducting a Text-based Online Focus Group

Steven R. Terrell

Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida USA

Having completed graduate degrees in educational research and counseling, I have studied the theory of focus groups and participated in many while in a classroom setting. Interestingly, I had never moderated one until my first attempt in a text-based online environment. This paper describes my preparation for the session as well as the issues I faced while actually conducted the focus group. Readers will find that being prepared by establishing rapport with their group prior to the event, understanding the change of dynamics that distance brings to the process and handling the pressures of an expanded role as moderator, will help ensure a successful focus group session. Key Words: Qualitative Research, Focus Group, Online, and Distance Education

Introduction

I have been involved in computer-based distance education for nearly 20 years. During this time, I have seen a tremendous growth in the types of tools we use; from very rudimentary e-mail systems to current learning management systems including threaded forums, blogs, wikis, threaded video and other primarily text-based, tools. Because of problems with cost, time-and-place availability of students and technical issues, I have never used synchronous tools such as video-conferencing. Because of the asynchronous nature of the tools I use, when asked how I know "who is on the other end of the line?" I promptly answer, "Usually I can't be sure." In fact, I tell them, I'm often reminded of the Peter Steiner cartoon that shows a dog typing at a computer keyboard while commenting to another dog sitting beside him, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog." It might be my student or it might be a relative, a friend or some other subject-matter expert; I just do not know. I have faith that my students want to learn, however, and I have learned to live with the bad parts of online education to benefit from the good. From that, I have learned a few lessons myself; let me use my current work with doctoral dissertation students and my first attempt at an online focus group to explain what I mean.

In the past several years, I have focused on helping discover ways to decrease student drop-out during the dissertation. Commonly accepted attrition rates of 50% in traditional doctoral environments sky-rocket up to 65% to 70% when students enroll in online or limited residency programs such as the ones I work in. While I have uncovered what I believe are many factors that contribute to these higher levels of drop-out (see, for example, Terrell, 2007, 2006, 2005), it never hurts for me to "keep my fingers on their pulse". I need to constantly monitor my students and try to determine what works and what does not work in our environment.

If such a situation arose in a traditional "brick and mortar" institution, it would be relatively easy to establish focus groups involving my students, collect data, analyze the results and implement changes based on what I learned. Unfortunately, the problem is created, and exacerbated, by the fact that my students are spread throughout the United States and the world – some are within a mile of campus; I have had others from as far away as Guam, Israel and Taiwan. As noted earlier, if my students all had access to synchronous video, it would still be somewhat easy to work with focus groups but that's hardly the case; we rely entirely on a synchronous (i.e., real-time) text-based approach using one of the many platforms designed for communication of that type. Since I'm in the beginning stages of trying to work with focus groups with my students, let me describe the approach I'm taking.

What Are We Actually Trying to Do?

First, I keep Kizinger and Barbour's (1999) definition of a focus group in mind as I'm working with my students: "Any group discussion may be called a focus group as long as the research is actively encouraging of, and attentive to, the group interaction" (p.20). That being said, it leaves the door wide open; we just have to define what we mean by "discussion". While it is traditionally thought of a synchronous verbal interchange between one or more people, we're going to define our discussion as responses to questions common to all focus groups (see, for example, Krueger, 1997) using a synchronous chat function of *WebCT*™, an online instructional management system developed by Blackboard, Inc. This tool offers a great deal of latitude and ease of use including the ability for the moderator "to mute or deny access or use the new "hand raise" mode to manage participation" (WebCT, 2006) and allows for the recording and storage of chat sessions.

Conducting the Actual Focus Group

The preliminaries leading up the actual study, such as determining the purpose and designing the study, developing the questions and identifying participants (Krueger & Casey, 2008) are essentially the same for any case study. O'Connor and Madge (2003) warn us, however, that is where we have to start paying close attention to the differences between the traditional focus group and the text-based approach we're interested in pursuing.

First, one has to consider the interpersonal dynamics of the group; particularly the relationship between the moderator and the other participants in the group. In a traditional focus group, we rely on visual and verbal cues to begin to establish rapport between members; obviously that cannot occur in the text-based environment. O'Connor and Madge (2003) suggest, however, posting photographs and brief biographies of participants to a Web-site thereby giving group members contextual information to which they could relate; this should be followed up with informational links and personalized e-mail to establish times and dates for the actual focus groups to take place. Doing this gives participants a chance to "get to know one another" before the focus groups actually begin.

Interestingly enough, many of these same concepts reflect what has begun standard pedagogy in distance education where experts such as Bonk and Dennen (2003) reinforce the social role of the instructor because of the need to "create a friendly and nurturing environment or community feel" (p. 339) in the online environment. In my online classes, I have students post their picture and respond to a series of questions giving information such as their name, occupation and, something I have found to be very much an ice-breaker, something interesting about themselves. This, I have found, really seems to strike a chord with my students and bonds of interest are soon formed, even at a distance.

While getting to know one another before the focus group starts is important, as noted by O'Connor and Madge (2003), this same friendliness and feeling of community changes the dynamics that many focus group moderators are accustomed to once the actual session starts. As was the case in getting to know one another, non-verbal cues and actions play a tremendous role in the way people react to one another in a traditional focus group. While that is lacking in the text-based online environment, we are rapidly becoming used to textually expressing our emotions via emoticons, abbreviations, highlighted text and extensive use of punctuation. We all know that ☺ means we're happy, LOL means we're laughing out loud, ;-) means I'm teasing you and :-o means I'm shocked! It is far easier, and clearer, to use a three-stoke key sequence that graphically explains something to the reader than to try to explain one's emotions.

Moderators are also no longer put into a position whereby they elicit and receive information but do not necessarily contribute their personal input; they are seen more as equals and active participants. As noted by Michaelson (1996) "The relative anonymity that information technology provides also changes the rules of discourse" (p. 58) with Kitchin (1998) stating that the Internet "provides an unrestricted freedom of expression that is far less hierarchical and formal than real world interaction." (p. 394). In short, the anonymity of the session levels the playing field – the participants are expecting the moderator to play an active role and they are far more emboldened by the distance and anonymity afforded by the technology.

I found this to be true in my very first attempt at holding an online focus group. In the session, I was interested in determining students' feelings about recent changes to our program that require many of them to return to campus for two additional meetings per year; obviously this can be quite costly and time-consuming, especially for those living outside of the state or country. In preparing for the sessions, I decided that the topic was very sensitive and, since I was their instructor, students would not be as forthcoming as they would be if a neutral moderator was involved. Because of that, I opted to assign each participant an anonymous user-id. As we will see, that breech of basic focus group protocol came back to haunt me quite rapidly!

When the actual sessions began, I used the following introductory and follow-up questions:

1. What is your reaction to the change?
2. How do the changes affect your life as a student?
3. Would this new schedule have affected your decision to attend the school?

These resulted in effective, meaningful conversation with little input on my part until one participant apparently tired of the entire process and interjected:

> Those who are spreading vitriolic comments should look at the longer view, figure out how to deal with the situation, and just drive on. The energy that is being wasted on this discussion could be better put to use on current coursework or preparation of dissertation materials!

I was a bit put off by this as I thought it was totally out of the context of the conversation; why didn't the participant just drop out rather than negatively influence and perhaps inhibit input from the rest of the group? At that point I wondered if they would have been so emboldened had they not been anonymous - my guess is not. I handled it by not reacting to it but, upon reading the work of O'Connor and Madge (2003), decided to always follow their guidance that "it remains important that participants are identifiable" (p. 139); a foundation of good focus groups. Their work, and their reference of others, has shown that the virtual environment alone is enough to encourage active insight from participants in the group.

One last series of issues that are of importance in online focus groups are the actual physical activities associated with the interview. These include the hardware and software that is used, the activities of the moderator during the session and the potential use of an assistant to handle overload.

For example, in this case, both the participants and I were already proficient and comfortable with the chat software used for the sessions. In instances where that is not the case, however, moderators and facilitators must be trained to use the technology prior to any focus group activity. Attempting to allow participants to "learn as they go" will affect the validity of the session and the data collected. There are many good chat software packages freely available (e.g., chat.yahoo.com) with more sophisticated chat functionality readily available in most course management systems such as Angel™ and Blackboard™. A relative newcomer to the market, www.gotomeeting.com, is rapidly becoming a leader in the field, especially with the use of voice-over-Internet protocols (VoIP). The key to success with any platform is to ensure it supports the basic functionality, including ease of communication, data capture and data storage, that you need.

Care has to also be taken not to "overload" the moderator by requiring an extensive amount of typing while asking or answering any questions. Given that, questions and any "set responses" should be created in a document that is readily accessible and easily used for "cutting and pasting". This was advice I learned after my first attempt at running a session but I was saved by the succinct nature of the questions I asked. Some researchers have gone so far as to suggest having a separate typist and moderator to ensure a smooth flow during the group session although I do not think this was necessary in my case. Hughes and Lang (2004) also believe a second moderator is necessary to keep the session on track due to the relative terseness of answers in an online environment, the overlapping answers afforded by the chat software and the rapidity with which people type.

Conclusion

My first experience with an online focus group was interesting. Although focus groups had been the topic of discussion in many courses during my counseling and educational research coursework, I had never actually participated in one, as either a moderator or participant, until this one. As I said, however, the preliminary steps were pretty much the same as would be the case for a traditional face-to-face session but things quickly diverged from the norm in the online environment. While I thought I had a good handle on what I wanted to do, it was evident that it was trail-and-error at best and there are certainly things I learned and will do differently next time. The data I collected are safely tucked away awaiting analysis, but that's a class down the road...

References

Bonk, C. J., & Dennen, V. (2003). Frameworks for research, design, benchmarks, training and pedagogy in Web-based distance education. In M. G. Moore & W. G. Anderson (Eds.), *Handbook of distance education* (pp. 331-348). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Hughes, J., & Lang, K. R. (2004). Issues in online focus groups: Lessons learned from an empirical study of peer-to-peer filesharing system users. *Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods, 2*(2), 95-110.

Kitchen, R. (1998). Towards geographies of cyberspace. *Progress in Human Geography, 22*(3), 385-406.

Kitzinger, J., & Barbour, R. S. (1999). Introduction: the challenge and promise of focus groups. In R.S. Barbour & J. Kitzinger (Eds.) *Developing focus group research: politics, theory and practice* (pp. 1-20). London, Sage.

Krueger, R.A. (1997). *Developing questions for focus groups*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2008) Focus *groups: A practical guide for applied research* (4th ed.) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Michaelson, K. L. (1996). Information, community and access. *Social Science Computer Review, 14*(1), 57-59.

O'Connor, H., & Madge, C. (2003). Focus groups in cyberspace: Using the Internet for qualitative research. *Qualitative Market Research, 6*(2), 133-143.

Terrell, S. (2005). A longitudinal investigation of the effect of information perception and focus on attrition in online learning environments. *Internet in Higher Education*, *8*(3), 213-219.

Terrell, S. (2006). Components of effective evaluation in online learning environments. In B. H. Khan (Ed.)*, Flexible learning in an information society* (pp. 236-246). Hershey, PA: Information Science Publishing.

Terrell, S. (2007, April). *Self-perceived causality for attrition from a limited residency doctoral program*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), Chicago, IL.

WebCT. (2006). *WebCT campus edition 6: teaching and learning datasheet*. Retrieved March 23, 2009, from http://www2.blackboard.com/service/ViewContent? contentID=25777052

Author Note

Dr. Steve Terrell is a Professor in the Graduate School of Computer and Information Sciences at Nova Southeastern University. He is the Past President of the Online Teaching and Learning SIG of the American Educational Research Association. He can be contacted at GSCIS, Nova Southeastern University, 3100 College Avenue, Ft. Lauderdale, Fl. 33314; Telephone: 954-262-2084; E-mail: terrell@nova.edu

Article Citation

Terrell, S. (2011). Face-to-face in writing: My first attempt at conducting a text-based online focus group. *The Qualitative Report, 16*(1), 286-291. Retrieved from http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR16-1/ofg.pdf