The Focus Group Interview: A Method for Assessing Users' Evaluation of Library Service

Richard Widdows, Tia A. Hensler, and Marlaya H. Wyncott

This is the age of customer service, and those involved with the provision of customer service are finding the focus group interview to be an efficient technique for assessing quality of service. This paper explains the rationale and method of the focus group interview and demonstrates how focus group interviews were used to gauge student-user opinions of service quality in Purdue University's library system. The relationship of this qualitative research technique to quantitative techniques is discussed.

ualitative research techniques are increasingly being used in the social sciences either as alternatives to or in conjunction with quantitative techniques.[1] As Rader Hayes has argued, qualitative and quantitative techniques are not mutually exclusive, but fall along a continuum.[2] In particular, qualitative techniques can often be used to collect information that may not emerge from a more traditional quantitative procedure.

Focus group interviews are a qualitative research technique involving repeated interviews with small groups of eight to twelve people with the intent of identifying the key concerns or wishes of the groups.[3] Through one to two hours of in-depth probing by a group moderator, key perceptions or attitudes of the groups become apparent. Usually, to compare key issues and beliefs between groups, investigators conduct more than one focus group.

Focus group interviews have strengths and weaknesses not found in quantitative research techniques. Benefits include the fact that participants tend to give candid information, that the technique is fairly inexpensive, and that the whole procedure can be carried out quickly.[4] The major weakness of focus group research is that data obtained from focus groups cannot be easily generalized to the larger population. For this reason, it is often better to use focus groups either as a complement to other studies or to obtain insights that can be tested and used in further work. Focus groups are particularly useful when interpreting results of previously obtained quantitative data, as demonstrated in the present study.[5]

Research conducted with focus group interviews has been used in a number of industries and disciplines. Marketers, the primary users of this technique, have utilized focus groups to provide consumer information for use in creating and promoting products and in gauging consumers' attitudes and behavior.[6] Recent marketing studies have even used the technique in the development of marketing strategies.[7] Focus groups are employed by virtually every major advertising agency, so that many advertising campaigns are based on results from focus group analysis.[8]

Although most extensively used by marketers, focus group research has been carried out by psychotherapists and counselors, community developers, consumer affairs professionals, small businesses, and lawyers, among others.[9-13] Focus group research also has been used in a variety of ways in college and research libraries. Focus group interviews with users of new technology, such as search assistance software and CD-ROM, have enabled library staff to evaluate the technology and come up with new ideas on how to use it.[14] These interviews were used in combination with questionnaires to assess novice end-users' skills in conducting searches. Through the interviews, users were able to express their levels of confidence with search mechanics and thereby provide guidelines for end-user training.[15] Karen Markey described the benefits of combining focus group interviews with quantitative analysis in a series of reports concerning online public access catalogues. Focus group interviews supplemented surveys by providing information on users' favorable and unfavorable experiences with the system.[16]

Focus group interviews have often involved library professionals themselves, as well as end users. Findings of interviews with librarians can be compared to those of interviews with end users in the evaluation of new technology. For instance, special interviews of library staff at one newspaper library uncovered the staff's perception of technology's role in newspaper production.[17] Book publishers have used librarian focus groups to learn about how books are ordered and to solicit advice in product development.[18]

Experience with focus group interviews in the library has shown them to be an excellent technique for determining users' expectations of a library, for evaluating the performance of the library, and for identifying areas of user satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Focus groups can be designed to obtain and compare expectations and evaluations of different users, such as faculty and students. Results from focus group work can also help identify and isolate a range of research questions to be tested through more quantitative methods or can provide in-depth exploration of the results of quantitative work.

Focus group research also has been used in a variety of ways in college and research libraries.

This paper looks at the role of focus groups as a customer service technique for college and research libraries. The paper shows how focus group research can be used to evaluate the quality of services offered by libraries. Finally, the paper details the steps involved in conducting focus group interviews and illustrates the use of the technique by describing a recent focus group study of student users of library facilities at Purdue University.

METHODS

Practitioners have identified three phases, or steps, of focus group interview research. Phase one involves preliminary preparation for conducting the interviews; phase two comprises the interviews themselves; and phase three involves analysis of the information collected during the interviews.[19] The methods adopted for this study of a college and research library illustrate how to implement the three phases to evaluate library services.

Phase One: Preliminaries

According to Thomas L. Greenbaum, researchers need to address four ele-

ments in phase one of a focus group study: the research goals, the population to be sampled, the script for the interviews, and the site at which the interviews will take place.[20]

The research goal of the study presented here was to clarify and expand information on students' opinions of library service quality through a quantitative research tool.[21] That is, the focus group research was conducted to supplement a questionnaire sent to university faculty and student users. The quantitative survey had solicited information on users' reasons for and patterns of library use; users' attitudes about the quality of the collection, library instruction, and the physical facilities; and users' desires regarding future services. While there had been an attempt to elicit comments on quality of service through open-ended questions, the information provided was not detailed enough to support planning—hence the current study.

Purdue University's library committee determined the population from which the focus groups would be drawn. The attitudes of student users were the primary concern. Another consideration was that the library system is decentralized, and evidence suggested that certain classes of student users, namely liberal arts majors and science majors, might differ in their evaluations of quality of service. Accordingly, four focus group interviews were designed, with two groups drawn from users of the humanities library and two from users of the life sciences library. The population was further subdivided into two groups: undergraduate and graduate students.

While the survey design was adhered to in part, some overlap of membership occurred when students attended on the "wrong" night and because posted notices and newspaper advertisements caused random recruitment. The survey found that almost all users frequented more than one library, and comments made during sessions often concerned libraries other than the two studied. As a result, the moderators allowed comment on any library, with the stipulation that students preface their remarks with the name of the library at issue.

The third element in phase one of focus group research consists of developing a script for the discussions. The script should help the group moderator facilitate the discussions and provide continuity among groups, yet not be so rigid as to channel discussion. The goals of the research determine the content of the script, with the aid of whatever insight is available from prior research and pilot studies.

The script of the study presented here covered three quality-of-service areas that had emerged as significant to students in the open-ended questions of the quantitative survey and in a trial focus group consisting of student users of one of the satellite libraries on campus. The areas were: convenience (location, hours); physical facilities and atmosphere (access to computers, quality of the collection, copying machines, reserves, noise, space, the lighting); and staff (competence, professionalism, courtesy, student help). Initial "warm-up" questions asked "What one thing most bothers you about the library system?" and "What do you like most about the library system?" The discussion closed with the question "What changes would you make to the library system?"

The fourth element of phase one is site selection, which affects the ease of conducting focus groups. Rooms should be large enough for participants, the moderator, and any assistants. Tables or chairs must be situated informally. Most focus group interviews are audio taped, requiring the availability of convenient electrical outlets. If possible, sessions are video taped from behind a two-way mirror. Additional observers are permitted only if an observation room exists. In this study, researchers were able to make use of consumer research facilities at the university.

Group recruitment is another factor researchers need to address. Recruiting participants is difficult because they usually have to give up their leisure time to attend. It is helpful if some inducement to participate, such as a cash pay-

ment or door prize, can be offered. For this study, group members were recruited through posted notices at the libraries and through in-class solicitation. Funds for an inducement to attend were not available for the study, but fortunately were not necessary.

Phase Two: Interviews

Part of the uniqueness of focus group research is the potential for group interaction—something that cannot happen in individual surveys or interviews. A danger associated with this, however, is biased results. Some individuals may dominate discussion in the groups, and others may remain silent.[22] Skilled moderators who have had experience dealing with different personality types are needed to facilitate communication among group members. Indeed, success of the sessions depends significantly on the skill of the group moderator.

For focus groups to be successful, the moderator must be experienced in establishing rapport, structuring rules, and setting objectives clearly to all participants. A skilled moderator should provoke intense discussion among members, as well as summarize the group's responses to determine the extent of agreement.[23] In the present study, a faculty member who had considerable experience conducting focus group interviews moderated the first two focus groups. Graduate students, one of whom had experience with focus groups, conducted the third and fourth sessions. The graduate students were assistant moderators in the initial two group meetings. Each session was audio taped, with a backup tape available. The first trial group was also video taped. Assistant moderators were present to take notes on the responses of participants.

Phase Three: Analysis

The analysis of focus group data requires that audio tapes of each session be transcribed and that comments be organized by topic and edited in sequential order until broad themes emerge. By this method, the researcher looks for trends or topics that are congruent among groups and ignores "rare event" data.[24] The researcher often performs statistical analyses on data, such as content analysis and frequency counts.[25] Because the current study supplemented a quantitative study, statistical interpretation of results was not a priority. And based on the data collected, the analysts thought that sufficient focus had appeared after the four groups and that additional sessions would be superfluous. This is consistent with the experience of focus groups in marketing. An interpretation of results now follows, demonstrating the kinds of information obtainable through focus group research.

RESULTS

Perhaps the major theme to emerge from the focus groups, one that had not been evident in responses to open-ended questions on the quantitative survey, was that student users had two levels of concern: long-term concerns and current systems concerns. Long-term concerns refer to the kind of library system that students would like to see in the future, while intermediate-term concerns refer to things that would make the current library system more convenient and user-friendly.

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The major long-term issue, which all groups focused on, was centralization. Purdue's present library system consists of multiple satellite libraries throughout the university campus. A dichotomy existed among the students about how they would like the system to change in the future and how this related to their service needs. The two groups consisting largely of humanities students tended to favor more centralization, whereas the groups largely from the sciences favored a decentralized system.

Those who favored centralization generally gave as their reason that, under

the current system, they had to make multiple trips to find the materials they needed. The desirability of being able to do all of this work in one library was a key consideration. One group favoring the idea of one big library also urged the retention of smaller decentralized libraries housing frequently consulted materials. The two groups favoring decentralization stated that they liked to do all of their work in one place close to their "home" academic department. Attention was drawn to the esprit de corps among those who frequented the same library.

As stated above, the script for the focus groups covered three areas: convenience, physical environment, and staffing. However, focus group discussions covered a wider range of student concerns with the current system. Primary areas of focus included the collection, hours of operation, the physical environment, the staff, copying machines, and computer referencing.

All four focus groups agreed that the library collection needed to be improved, though emphasis differed by type of student. Graduate students were more concerned with the journal collection—in particular, with foreign journals—than with books. Availability of the collection was an issue of concern among all four groups. Some students observed that pages or entire articles were missing from volumes or journals. All groups expressed a desire for better access to materials on reserve and quicker reshelving of material.

Comments about the physical environment tended to be location specific and, therefore, of interest to the individual libraries. One library was singled out for its comfortable chairs, another for its noise, and another for its high temperatures. Other problems mentioned included graffiti, poor lighting, and lack of individual study rooms. Of general concern, given the satellite system, was lack of uniformity in hours of operation and shelving policies among libraries.

Groups universally agreed that the professional staff were excellent. All users appreciated their helpfulness, and one group worried that they worked too hard. Students were not quite so enthusiastic about student helpers, citing inadequate knowledge as the reason for their dissatisfaction, but were still positive about them.

As frequently happens in focus group research, issues that were not part of the original script, but that were clearly regarded as important by the group members, emerged.

Each of the four focus groups mentioned problems and frustrations with making copies throughout the library system. The main criticism was that not enough copiers were available to students. Group members discussed what machines they liked and what locations needed more copiers. Students frequently complained about long lines. Three of the four groups mentioned the lack of change machines and the desire to acquire copy cards at each satellite.

As frequently happens in focus group research, issues that were not part of the original script, but that were clearly regarded as important by the group members, emerged. Indeed, one technique of focus group research is to keep the script flexible enough that if an unsuspected issue emerges in one of the early groups, it can be incorporated into discussion in the succeeding groups to confirm or deny its significance.

In the present study, two such issues emerged. The focus group moderators were able to incorporate the newly discovered topics into the script and to provide useful information to the libraries as a result of the ensuing discussion. The first issue concerned a computerized reference system that had recently been installed at the university. In general, response to the system was positive, although some disagreement occurred about its user-friendliness. All groups asked for more terminals and desired "free" online searches.

The second topic addressed how students learned to use the libraries. The

topic emerged in the first focus group under the auspices of the question "What bothers you most about the libraries?" and the theme was developed in subsequent groups. The feeling was that current levels of instruction on library use are inadequate. Few students had received any instruction through their classes. Some had participated in a self-guided audio tour and found it "O.K. as far as it goes." Most were self-taught or asked individual librarians for help. Out of the discussion came a general plea for integrating use of library resources with classroom work.

CONCLUSION

Focus group interviewing is a method of qualitative research that has proven useful in many disciplines. The present study utilized focus group interviews to determine student user perceptions and attitudes regarding a segmented university library system. Although the results are specific to the library system under study, they were presented here as an example of the kind of information that can be obtained by use of this research technique.

Analysis showed two levels of concern among student users. Long-term issues focused on whether the system should be centralized. Issues concerning the current system focused on practical aspects of quality of library service, such as the state of the collection, the competency of the staff, and the availability of copy machines. In addition to evaluating current services, the groups came up with many recommendations as to how the services might be improved. Some of these recommendations have already been put into practice and others are under discussion.

In the course of the focus group research, students identified two areas that they thought were important to quality of service, but that had not been included in the original script. These areas were a computerized catalog and the integration of instruction on library use into classes. The emergence of areas of concern not identified a priori is an anticipated benefit of focus group research.

As stated above, the focus group interviews were intended to supplement a questionnaire survey. While the survey had gone a long way toward evaluating student attitudes toward library service, the use of scaled responses to set questions had necessarily limited the results to frequencies or rankings over predetermined items. Open-ended questions were used to elaborate on what were thought in advance to be key issues, but few respondents took the time to write answers to these questions, and those answers that were received tended to be terse and lacking in informational content. As a result, the qualitative information discussed above truly represented a supplement to the surveys. Overall, this focus group study demonstrates the potential benefits of this qualitative research technique to librarians who want and need to know how their services are being received and to administrators who are responsible for the libraries.

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