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Using Message Boards to Conduct Online Focus Groups

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Abstract

Geographic dispersion of research subjects can make traditional face-to-face focus groups difficult if not impractical to conduct. Online focus groups have many advantages such as enabling researchers to save costs, allowing for more efficient collection of data, and allowing researchers to accommodate research subjects' schedules. However, online focus groups require greater skill on the part of the researcher and research subjects alike. This manuscript chronicles the process that we recently used to conduct an online focus group using a message board system with graduate students enrolled in an online degree program. We explain the processes that were followed in conducting our study and the rationale behind the decisions that we made as qualitative researchers. Finally, we offer guidance and insight for other qualitative researchers who wish to utilize message boards to conduct online focus groups.

Keywords

Online Focus Groups, Message Boards, Graduate Students, Online Degree Programs, and Qualitative Research

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Using Message Boards to Conduct Online Focus Groups

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Geographic dispersion of research subjects can make traditional face-to-face focus groups difficult if not impractical to conduct. Online focus groups have many advantages such as enabling researchers to save costs, allowing for more efficient collection of data, and allowing researchers to accommodate research subjects' schedules. However, online focus groups require greater skill on the part of the researcher and research subjects alike. This manuscript chronicles the process that we recently used to conduct an online focus group using a message board system with graduate students enrolled in an online degree program. We explain the processes that were followed in conducting our study and the rationale behind the decisions that we made as qualitative researchers. Finally, we offer guidance and insight for other qualitative researchers who wish to utilize message boards to conduct online focus groups. Key Words: Online Focus Groups, Message Boards, Graduate Students, Online Degree Programs, and Qualitative Research

Introduction

Focus groups, also referred to as group interviews, are "essentially a qualitative data-gathering technique that relies on the systematic questioning of several individuals simultaneously in a formal or informal setting" (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 703). The strategies associated with using focus groups in qualitative research are based upon methods developed in marketing research. Likewise, focus group methods have been utilized by political parties and have been utilized to conduct sociological research. Focus groups may take different forms, but normally include seven to ten people (Fontana & Frey; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Rossman and Rallis offer the following explanation of why using focus groups may be preferable to conducting interviews with individuals:

The interaction among the participants is the critical characteristic of this type of interviewing. This technique assumes that an individual's attitudes and beliefs do not form in a vacuum: People often need to listen to others' opinions and understandings to clarify their own. Often, the questions in a focus group are deceptively simple: the trick is to promote interactive talk through the creation of a permissive environment. (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 193)

The use of online focus groups is well established in the field of qualitative research as are the pros and cons associated with their use. The advantages associated with online focus groups include more efficient data collection methods, easier management of the data, as well as the ability to include participants who may be

geographically dispersed (Anderson & Kanuka, 2003). Despite the advantages of online focus groups, there are some issues that may prove to be challenging for qualitative researchers. The processes of identifying and inviting participants, handling human subject issues, deciding between synchronous or asynchronous formats, communicating effectively in an online environment, and establishing rapport require both great skill as well as represent some of the decisions that researchers must address (Anderson & Kanuka; Creswell, 2007; Rezabek, 2000).

Setting the Scene

Our research study included graduate students who were enrolled in an online master of education degree at a research university in the mid-south. Students who are enrolled in the graduate degree program completed all procedures associated with enrollment, including but not limited to making application to the program, completing advising sessions with faculty, registering for classes, purchasing books, and completing comprehensive exams usually without stepping foot on the physical grounds of the university campus. Students included in our research study communicated with faculty and staff affiliated with the online master of education degree program almost exclusively via email and telephone. A visit to campus to meet with a faculty or staff member was the exception, rather than the rule.

Appropriateness of Online Focus Groups

Qualitative researchers must carefully select data collection strategies that are appropriate for the type of research that is being conducted. Likewise, the abilities of the research subjects to participate in the study and provide data through the selected data collection method(s) must be considered. With this in mind, we acknowledge that online focus groups are not appropriate for all qualitative research settings or all group interviews. However, we present two compelling reasons why online focus groups were appropriate for use in our study. First, our research subjects were graduate students who were geographically dispersed throughout the state and region where we conducted our research and our research subjects would not be able to attend face-to-face focus group sessions. Secondly, our research subjects were working adults in an online graduate degree program. Even if the research subjects were in proximity to the institution, the chances of identifying a time to hold the focus groups that would accommodate all participants' schedules would be difficult at best.

Why the Online Message Board?

The online graduate degree program in which our research subjects were enrolled utilized a comprehensive course management system to deliver all courses included in the degree program to students. The comprehensive course management system enabled faculty to develop course modules, conduct synchronous and asynchronous discussions, incorporate the use of streaming video and other forms of multimedia, send email to students, comment to students privately regarding their assignment submissions, as well as develop and administer assessments or surveys. The system is integrated with the

university's student information (academic records) system as well as email system and thus student usernames and passwords are the same for all three systems.

Given that our study focused on student experiences and expectations with the online graduate degree program, we felt it was critical to conduct the online focus group in a safe place. We wanted students to be able to discuss their experiences in a candid manner without fear of their comments jeopardizing their standing in any course or the online graduate degree program. We did not want students to feel pressured or coerced to "say the right thing" in an effort to not offend any faculty affiliated with the degree program. Therefore, the necessity to ensure full anonymity and confidentiality of responses in the online focus group regarding student experiences and expectations was critically important to the design of our study.

We explored the use of the comprehensive course management system as a platform within which to conduct our online focus group and even explored methods to ensure anonymity and confidentiality of responses within that system with no success. In order to maintain full anonymity and confidentiality as a dimension of our study, we elected to use an online message board system that was independent of the course management system. We examined a number of online message boards and selected one that allowed participants to create a username and password of their choosing through a self-guided registration process. The online message board that we selected was not accessible to all web users and allowed us to invite participants by directing them to the registration page for our online focus group. We paid a nominal fee for the online message board we opted to use.

Online Focus Group Process

Our decision to conduct online focus groups in an environment that ensured full anonymity and confidentiality created challenges for us as qualitative researchers. The processes of selecting participants, developing instructions for those participants, sending invitations, monitoring focus group dialogue, and reaching consensus required consistent attention to detail and oversight throughout the data collection process.

Selecting Participants

We were purposeful in the selection of our research subjects. Our initial criteria for selecting participants for the study included students who were at least half-way through their coursework for the degree, who had maintained fulltime employment while completing the degree, and who had been enrolled continuously upon admission to the degree program. These criteria were based, in part, upon the focus and purpose of our study which was to explore experiences and expectations with the online graduate degree program among working adults who were, again, the research subjects.

However, the decision to utilize online focus groups to conduct our research study required that we consider other factors for selecting participants. Specifically, we selected students who were familiar with Internet technologies and who were very skilled in communicating in a textual-based asynchronous environment. When considering potential participants for inclusion in the study, we purposely chose to not invite any student who had experienced repeated difficulty with the course management system.

This was especially important given that participants would be required to navigate the self-guided online registration process in order to establish a username and password of their choosing in order to participate in the focus group via the online message board system.

Inviting Participants

An invitation was sent to selected students (research subjects) enrolled in the online graduate degree program after obtaining institutional review board (IRB) approval. The invitation was sent to students who had met the previously stated criteria. The invitation was sent via email and advised participants that participation was voluntary and that responses would remain confidential. We also informed them that they were free to withdraw at any time and that deciding to withdraw would not affect their grade or standing in any course or the degree program.

We explained that use of the message board system would ensure their anonymity as it was independent of the online course management system. Our invitation steps that the students would have to follow in order to establish a username and password through the message board system. Likewise, students were advised of the duration of the focus groups and were advised of what dates the researchers would pose new rounds of questions. Students were also advised that they should log into the online message board at least once a week to respond to comments from their peers. The implied informed consent document advised students to not register or follow the link to the registration page for the online focus group if they decided to not participate. Finally, students were advised that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

The invitation included the following steps that students were asked to complete in order to participate in the online focus group:

1. Carefully review the attached implied informed consent document which explains rights and responsibilities as a participant in this study, the timeline for the online focus group, and purpose of the research.
2. Follow the link to the registration page for the online focus group through the message board system. Following the registration link to the online message board system and completion of the registration process implies consent for participating in the study.
3. Enter the email address that we used to send them the invitation message. (Note: The online message board system allowed the researchers to enter the email addresses of the invited participants and only people with those email addresses could register and participate through the message board system. However, the researchers were unable to access the email addresses associated with any username or password).
4. Create a username and password that is different from and does not include any part of their university-issued username and password for the course management system, student information system, or email system. We also advised students to not create a username that could be used to personally identify them.

We invited a total of eleven students to participate in the online focus group and a total of nine participated. Given that the participants had to develop a username and password of their choosing in order to ensure their full anonymity and confidentiality, we as the researchers do not know the identity of the two students who did not participate or why they chose to not participate in the study. However, we feel that our methods to identify research subjects were appropriate and registration instructions were adequate given that 81% of those who were invited to participate in the focus group accepted our invitation and successfully navigated the self-guided online registration process in order to establish a username and password of their choosing.

Online Focus Group Process

The message board system was restricted to those participants whom we invited to participate, and access to the dialogue of the online focus group was password protected. The message board system allowed participants to view and respond to comments from other participants in the focus groups. Participants in the research project were encouraged to log into the message board system and participate in the focus group as often as they wished. The online focus groups were held in an asynchronous format. The decision to use the message board system was predicated on the necessity to utilize asynchronous communication in the online environment due to the characteristics of the population. A synchronous format would be difficult if not impractical for our research subjects (students) to participate in given that they are working adults who are attempting to balance the demands of family, career, and school.

We posed three rounds of questions to the participants regarding their experiences in the online graduate degree program over a period of six weeks. We carefully monitored online focus group dialogue and content throughout the data collection process. We had three primary questions and interjected follow-up questions as necessary. We did not wish to steer or control the content of the discussion, but rather posed questions to participants throughout the study to clarify or expand upon topics that were introduced into the discussion. Likewise, when the discussion got off course, we would redirect the group to the topic of the online focus group.

We began the online focus group with a *grand tour* question. According to Shank (2006), grand tour questions are "very broad and unfocused" and allow the interviewee to lead the researcher "on a grand tour of the topic or setting" (Shank, p. 46). For our grand tour question, we asked students to discuss their overall experience with the online graduate degree program. During the first two weeks of the online focus group, we followed up with questions that asked participants to explain in what ways they had been able to apply the content that they learned in the program and to tell us if there was something that they would like to learn that they had not learned in the program. These two follow-up questions, which were interjected after the initial *grand tour* question, were based upon participant comments. Unfortunately, the initial comments from participants were not specific enough to provide adequate description of the experiences they had as an online graduate student. Thus we had to use follow up questions to elicit more information and greater feedback from the participants. We used the same approach during the second and third round of questions.

The second question that we posed during the online focus group asked students to discuss meaningful assignments that they completed in coursework during their enrollment in the online graduate degree program. Our follow-up questions to the second question asked participants to discuss how technology affected their completion of assignments and what they thought should be the minimum expectations of faculty regarding feedback for assignments. The third and final primary question asked participants to explain what keeps them enrolled in the online graduate degree program. We did not interject a follow up question given that the participants provided adequate responses to that question.

The second and third primary questions for our online focus group as well as the follow up questions to the second question were based upon the dialogue that occurred among participants. It is important to state that we did not intend to ask the specific second or third questions that we did in the study. Our protocol, specifically the questions for the focus groups, was semi-structured and we were amenable to what topics the students would introduce provided that they related to their experiences as graduate students in an online degree program.

Participation Rate

We had the highest level of participation among research subjects during the first two weeks of our online focus group when students responded to the first question regarding their overall experiences and subsequent follow up questions. Participation in the online focus group dropped steadily during the second and third round of questions which came after week three. We also observed the highest level of interaction among participants in the study during the first two weeks of the online focus group. During round one there were 16 responses from participants to the researchers and 14 responses from participants to other participants. During round two there were 12 responses to the researchers and three responses from participants to other participants. Two participants did not respond to the researchers during the second round; however, one of these two participants did respond to another participant. During the third and final round there were seven responses to the researchers and three responses from participants to other participants. Two participants did not participate in the third round of questions for the focus groups. The frequency of participation among participants by each round of the online focus group is outlined in Table 1.

As qualitative researchers we are unsure of what caused the decline in participation in our online focus group. Our analysis of the frequency of responses during the second and third round coupled with the length of responses as well as the substance of those responses leads us to a couple of conclusions about what might have caused this decline. First, we believe that enthusiasm was strongest among participants at the beginning of the online focus group given the frequency of responses from participations as well as their responses to each other. It seems that participants were eager to participate and dialogue about their experiences with their peers at the beginning. Secondly, we believe that the period of time that we attempted to run the online focus group was too lengthy. Although we monitored participants' responses and interjected appropriate follow up questions to elicit more detailed responses and keep the participants engaged, we underestimated the tendency of the participants to remain active

throughout the entire process which lasted six weeks. Likewise participants were more concerned with responding to the researchers during the second and third round and there were far fewer responses to other participants during this time. Responses to other participants during the second and third round were somewhat unilateral statements such as "I agree" with little or no substance that contributed to the dialogue of the online focus group. This was unlike the first round where participants would comment extensively and offer examples from their own experiences in the online graduate degree program to add to the statements from other participants. Thus the dialogue during the first round of the online focus group contained much richer descriptions of the lived experiences among students in the online graduate degree program.

Table 1. Participation Frequencies for Online Focus Group Participants

Participant	Round 1		Round 2		Round 3	
	Response to Researchers	Response to Other Participants	Response to Researchers	Response to Other Participants	Response to Researchers	Response to Other Participants
A	1	3	1		1	
B	2	3	2	1	1	1
C	1	2	1		1	
D	1	1	2		1	
E	2	1		1		
F	2		1		1	1
G	2		3	1	1	1
H	2	1	2			
I	3	3			1	
Totals	16	14	12	3	7	3

Despite the fact that frequency of participation and quality of participation declined during the second and third rounds of the online focus group, we feel that we adhered to the appropriate methods for conducting our research study. Our focus group ran its natural course and we remained cognizant of its lifespan by monitoring levels and quality of participation among the research subjects. It would have been inappropriate for us to attempt to extend the focus group beyond its natural course. Although the online focus group ran its natural course and participation levels declined throughout the process, we were able to reach levels of consensus and reach a point of saturation with the collected data. This would not have been possible if we had not properly monitored

the online focus group and interjected follow up questions to elicit more information and greater detail from the participants.

Use of Message Boards for Other Online Focus Groups

As we previously stated, online focus groups are not appropriate for all group interviews or qualitative research settings. However, we have a few observations about the use of the message board system for our online focus group. First, the use of a message board system was appropriate for our research given that the configuration of the comprehensive course management system used to deliver courses for the online graduate degree program would not allow us to ensure anonymity and confidentiality among the participants. We were successful in getting a high participation rate among those who we invited to the online focus group which was due to our careful selection of individuals who were asked to participate and the efforts made to develop clear instructions for completing the self-directed online registration process for the message board system. Our success is also due in part to the rapport we had developed as faculty with the students we invited, although we are unsure of their identity due to the anonymity feature provided by the message board system. Finally, the highest quality of data was gathered during the initial round of the online focus group. Our careful monitoring throughout the duration of the focus group, specifically during the first two weeks, enabled us to obtain the greatest insight from participants in our study about their experiences in the online graduate degree program.

Based upon these observations, we offer the following as guidance for other qualitative researchers who wish to utilize message board systems to conduct online focus groups.

1. Message board systems can be an appropriate medium to ensure anonymity and confidentiality among participants provided that those systems enable participants to generate their own username and password when researchers do not need or wish to know the identity of study participants.
2. Implied informed consent documents must adequately explain the participants' right and responsibilities and state that both registration and participation in the online focus groups indicates their consent to being research subjects in the study. Furthermore, the informed consent document must carefully outline the procedures that will be utilized, the length of the study, and methods of communication for the online focus groups.
3. Participants who are invited to participate in online focus groups conducted via message board systems must be proficient in the use of Internet technologies and must be accustomed to communicating in textual-based formats. The ability to communicate in an online environment is as important as other criteria for selection.
4. Rapport with participants should exist before the online focus group begins. Valuable time that could be used to collect data could be lost if the researchers have to spend time developing rapport with research

participants. Rapport can exist even when anonymous data collection methods are utilized such as an online message board system.

5. Researchers must capitalize on synergy and enthusiasm when it exists among online focus group participants. Because online focus group participants are geographically dispersed, researchers must seize every opportunity to elicit more feedback and insight from participants as the researchers may not be aware of issues that might affect future participation levels of the study.
6. Researchers must have a consistent presence in the online focus groups without attempting to steer the conversation or attempting to coerce participants. They should pose questions, follow up with appropriate questions in order to elicit more details, and only redirect the conversation when absolutely necessary. They must be amenable to allowing the focus group to take its own direction, run its natural course, and never extend its lifespan.

Conclusion

Message board systems can be an appropriate medium for conducting online focus groups when both the researchers and research subjects possess exceptional skills for communicating through Internet technologies in textual-based environments. Instructions and expectations for participation must be clearly articulated to the research subjects and the elements of trust and rapport are more essential to success in online focus groups than in other interview formats. Researchers must closely monitor the data collection process in an attempt to gauge the level of interest among participants. Researchers should never attempt to extend the online focus group unnecessarily. Finally, researchers should expect some level of attrition among research subjects in online focus groups.

Qualitative researchers should be amenable to the new forms of data that are emerging in the field which Creswell (2007) described provided that appropriate processes are utilized to collect that type of qualitative data. Qualitative researchers should carefully explain their approach and provide adequate rationale for their decisions when collecting new forms of qualitative data. The latitude afforded qualitative researchers can be the metaphorical double-edged sword if the approaches utilized and decisions made are unreasonable or are not properly justified within the parameters of the research study. Qualitative researchers must understand that novel approaches to data collection are not appropriate to all qualitative research settings. The context of the study and demographic characteristics of the research subjects determine if novel approaches are appropriate or warranted. Qualitative researchers must provide an adequate audit trail in order to validate the use of novel data collection methods.

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