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Using Participatory Focus Groups Of Graduate Students To Improve Academic Departments: A Case Example

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Abstract

The authors report on a participatory focus group evaluation of an academic department. The 20 participants, and the majority of the evaluators, were graduate students in that department. The authors report on their methods, their reflections, ethical issues they encountered and what they did about them, and how they used the results.

Keywords

Program Evaluation, Focus Groups, Graduate Students, and Academic Department

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Using Participatory Focus Groups Of Graduate Students To Improve Academic Departments: A Case Example

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The authors report on a participatory focus group evaluation of an academic department. The 20 participants, and the majority of the evaluators, were graduate students in that department. The authors report on their methods, their reflections, ethical issues they encountered and what they did about them, and how they used the results. Key words: Program Evaluation, Focus Groups, Graduate Students, and Academic Department

Introduction

We recently used participatory focus groups of graduate students to evaluate our department. In this paper we will report on what we did and how we did it, the ethical challenges we faced, and our reflections on the process. We hope that our experience might help others who wish to use participatory focus groups to evaluate their own department or program.

Participatory action research was originally used to empower oppressed groups in Third World countries, but researchers increasingly are using it in developed countries (Reason, 1994). In participatory research, one seeks to learn about the needs of participants and to translate this information into constructive action (Piercy & Thomas, 1998). Participatory action research differs from other qualitative methods in the collaboration the researcher fosters with the participants. Often, the researcher trains participants to be co-researchers themselves, and involves them in the research process. The methods are collaborative, self-reflective, empowering, and support action.

In traditional evaluation, the evaluator, typically an expert, uses surveys and other quantitative methods to extract knowledge from his or her participants that may or may not be shared with the participants themselves. If knowledge is power (Foucault, 1980), then traditional evaluators, the exclusive gatherers, analyzers, and possessors of the knowledge, are indeed in a hierarchical, more powerful position than their research participants. Participatory evaluators, on the other hand, attempt to flatten the hierarchy by involving knowledgeable research participants as active co-researchers (Bishop, 1989;

Scriven, 1993). Participatory evaluators invite participants to generate, own, use, and share their knowledge and expertise; typically, the participants are empowered in the process (DeSantis, 1994; Fetterman, Kaftavian, & Wandersman, 1996).

Our own use of participatory focus groups grew out of our interest in gaining a general sense of how graduate students in the Department of Human Development see various aspects of their department. We held the assumption that, for them, “perceived reality is reality.” We hoped that our findings would support graduate student investment in the department and its improvement. We also hoped that our findings would help faculty and administrators better understand what they are doing well and what they might do differently. To this end, we used focus groups lead by graduate student facilitators and (to a lesser extent) e-mail interviews of graduate students to gather this information.

Method

Focus Groups

A focus group is a small group interview on a specific topic. Focus groups consist of about 6-10 participants and usually last from 1-3 hours (Patton, 2002). Educators can use focus groups to understand students’ perceptions on different aspects of a program (Patton, 2002; Piercy & Nickerson, 1996). Focus groups also give students a forum to acknowledge strengths and air grievances, as well as to identify problems that faculty and administrators can address. Finally, the participatory nature of focus groups supports the participants’ investment in the results, and may represent an important intervention in itself.

Focus groups have certain advantages that other participatory methods may not. Because the students give feedback in a group, they can build upon each other’s answers (e.g., “Oh, yeah, that happened to me, but for me it was this way...”) and evaluators can gather a lot of information in a short time. Also, group members can hold each other accountable for honest recollections of experiences. The group format, however, limits the number of topics that the group can discuss. Furthermore, some people may be reluctant to share their opinions with other participants listening. Others may be concerned about the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses in the group. Students may fear repercussions from unfavorable opinions about the department. We attempted to overcome these concerns by also giving graduate students the opportunity to anonymously write their answers to the questions used in the focus group (by sending the questions by e-mail attachment and allowing students to submit responses electronically or by a printed hard copy, without their name attached).

Participants

We conducted two focus groups. One group consisted of ten current, full-time graduate students in the Department of Human Development in Blacksburg and the other consisted of six full-time graduate students. We announced the focus groups through e-mail and used a confidential e-mail sign-up procedure. Therefore, the faculty was not aware of who would be in the groups or when or where the groups would be held. This

helped to increase confidentiality and anonymity. In addition, we also provided an alternative to focus group participation. Graduate students could instead complete an e-mail interview consisting of the same questions that we used in the focus group. Four full-time graduate students chose that option. Thus, a total of 20 participants took part in this evaluation, which is approximately 51% of our current resident full-time graduate students. These students were similar to the larger graduate student population in terms of age, gender, and race. However, they tended to be in the first and second years of their graduate programs since all were full-time graduate students. Given our purposes, to understand graduate students' perceptions of various aspects of our department, this participant pool seemed sufficient. Also, it is important to remember that representativeness is not as important in qualitative research as is the credibility and usefulness of the data collected.

Procedures

The department head and three volunteer doctoral students carried out the present focus group evaluation. The department head, also fourth author, wanted to get a better understanding of the perceptions of graduate students within the department and asked the second author to help. The second author recruited the first and third authors to be co-researchers. All four researchers had the common goal of giving more voice to graduate students within the department. Also, the three doctoral students took part to get more experience in focus group methods of inquiry.

The first three authors, all graduate students, were trained in focus group methods by the fourth author, the department head. They read articles (e.g., Piercy & Nickerson, 1996) and books (e.g., Krueger, 1994) on the focus group process, and practiced leading focus groups while receiving feedback. Also, they rehearsed handling difficult focus group situations by creating "what if" scenarios and generating appropriate responses together.

We met several times to develop a list of questions for the focus groups. Once we developed our questions, we asked the departmental Graduate Policies Committee whether they would like to add additional questions related to departmental missions or issues on which they wanted feedback. The evaluation team used their feedback to come up with the final eight general questions.¹ The last question included a number of issues for discussion (e.g., quality of teaching, quality of advising, quality of research experience). See Appendix A for the questions we used.

To encourage honest and free participation, we assured participants that the department head and faculty would not know who participated and who did not. We also told them that their names would not be used in any way. (Instead, we assigned them pseudonyms.) Initially, we informed all graduate students in the department of the

¹ Not all members of the Graduate Policies Committee were equally encouraging about our focus group evaluation. For example, one committee member wrote, "The connotation of "focus group" and the formality (ground rules, evaluation written up)...imply a vaulted claim for research credibility. If the purpose is only to get a feel for students – great; if the purpose is broader than that, then the sample and methods are insufficient." Others suggested we include graduates and employers in our evaluation. We are comfortable with the scope and methods of our evaluation. We share the committee's reservations and suggestions to remind the reader that it is likely that some will be quick to criticize focus group methods, and that undoubtedly others would do a quite different evaluation.

evaluation by e-mail. The e-mail explained our goals and asked interested students to sign up for a day and time to participate in the focus group. Participants were assigned to one of the two focus groups based on their availability. For students who were unable to attend the focus group times, and/or did not feel safe taking part in the focus group, we offered them the choice of completing an e-mail version of the focus group questions.

The first two authors each lead one of the focus groups. The third author served as the main observer and note taker for both focus groups. The observer gathered data that would not be picked up by the tape recorder (e.g., strength of agreement). Also, the observer recorded initial themes that seemed to come up during the focus group. The observer did not record names or identifying information, but did use the assigned pseudonyms.

The department head (the fourth author) served mainly as an advisor to the three doctoral student evaluators. He was less involved in the actual data collection and analysis so that participants could feel secure that he would not know who contributed what. The doctoral student evaluators were the only ones to have access to the list of participants, informed consents, audiotapes, and transcriptions.

In conducting the focus groups, each focus group leader followed a written protocol that included the purpose, how the focus group would work, what would be done with the information, the ground rules, and the questions (Appendix A). Each focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes. A mini-cassette tape recorder was placed in the middle of the conference room table and tested several times. At the end of each tape, one of the researchers would ask whoever was speaking at that time to pause while a new tape was put in the tape recorder to ensure that there would be no missing data.

Although both focus groups followed the same protocol, the group process differed slightly due to the dynamics and makeup of each group. Researchers attempted to regulate the amount of time spent on each question as well as how much time each participant spent talking. This regulation was helpful because there were several participants that tended to monopolize the time in the focus group and some participants who were not as forthcoming with their thoughts. Each focus group began with an "icebreaker question" that asked each participant to draw a picture or a metaphor to describe an aspect of his or her experience within the department. This provided an opportunity for each participant to share early in the group, and consequently feel more comfortable in the group. Finally, at the beginning of each focus group, researchers discussed how each participant's confidentiality and anonymity would be protected and how they, too, needed to respect the confidentiality and anonymity of the group and each group member.

Constas (1992) states that, "...categories do not simply 'emerge' from the data. In actuality, categories are created, and meanings are attributed by researchers... (p. 254)" In the spirit of Constas' call for transparency in the data analysis process, we will describe the process we used to develop our theme categories.

Once we completed the focus groups, the first author of the evaluation team transcribed the audiotapes of the sessions, substituting the participants' pseudonyms for their names. (The first author received special-topic course credit for her work on this project.) Then the three graduate student evaluators compiled initial themes and representative quotes from these transcripts, notes taken by the observer, pictures made by focus group members, and four additional e-mail interviews that included the same

questions as the focus group interviews. Each of the three graduate student evaluators read over each of the documents once to get a general sense of the issues raised. Then, on the second reading, they identified initial themes (noting them in the margins) that seemed to be reflected in the data. They used the iterative process of constant comparison and analytic induction (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) as they proceeded through their second reading to support or modify the emerging themes. Then each of the three graduate student evaluators met to discuss their separate themes and to again modify them to come up with a final distillation of themes, which seemed to group naturally under more overarching categories, and overarching categories. We were satisfied with the saturation of categories across groups. We then gave the themes to the focus group participants to judge their validity and to allow them to edit statements that might identify themselves. In sum, the three graduate student evaluators named and revised the theme categories themselves through a collaborative, iterative process, and supported their credibility through seeking the input of the participants (Constas, 1992).

Discussion

Our purpose in this article is not to report our complete results, which are specific to our department. Instead, we will focus on illustrative results, ethical issues that emerged, our evaluation process, and how we used the results. We hope that our experience will inform and motivate others to undertake a similar evaluation.

Ethical Issues

Several ethical issues arose during the evaluation. We assured the participants that we would do our best to keep their comments as confidential as possible. One of the struggles with this was that many students illustrated specific complaints with personal examples. If we had reported these examples or even the details of their concerns, we would have revealed their identity. At the same time, we didn't want to leave them out. If participants felt that their issues were important enough to bring up in the focus group, we felt like we would be doing them a disservice to make them so vague that they would become less clear and compelling.

Similarly, one participant shared a concern about something the department head did. Since the department head was guiding us through the project, this presented some interesting reporting issues. How do we get this participant's concern across without making the person's identity obvious to the fourth author of the focus group report? Since it was just one person's complaint, and pertained to one particular incident, was it even worthy of reporting? On the other hand, if we chose to leave this concern out of the report, would we be inappropriately ignoring a significant concern for this graduate student (and perhaps appear to be whitewashing our results)? Alternatively, if we report the concern in a vague manner, to protect the identity of the participant, would the concern be so unclear as not to be helpful? We decided that we should report the concern, but consulted the participant first about her thoughts on the best way to do so (which she said would be through making a general point under a particular theme without including the specific example).

Other issues also related to confidentiality. We initially used pseudonyms for every quote. Later we deleted many to protect participant's identity. For example, we edited "Betty, a graduate student in child development, stated" into "a graduate student in child development stated," and finally to "a graduate student stated," so that faculty would be less likely to speculate on who said what.

In every research meeting with the department head (the fourth author), one of the three graduate student evaluators inevitably asked the others, "did I say too much?" As student researchers and colleagues of our graduate student participants, we felt we needed to be careful to not say anything that might reveal their identity. At the same time, the department head requested the evaluation and needed clear results to implement changes in the department. He was also a collaborator in the research process, and someone we wanted to confide in and be clear with. How clear should we be? How much do we confide? These were ongoing concerns, but ones we seemed to handle reasonably well by raising our concerns and those of our peers in a way that focused on issues and not persons or personalities.

One of us worried that faculty members would possibly think of her as an "informant" to the department head. Would she experience negative repercussions from her role in the project? This did not happen. On the contrary, one faculty member actually asked her when the report would be finished, because she was interested in understanding graduate students' views on several issues.

Perhaps many of our conflicts came from the multiple roles that we graduate student researchers (the first three authors) played. Our insider/outsider status generated more than a few dual relationships. The second author, who took on roles of both researcher and participant, describes it this way:

As a student I was also a participant in one of the focus groups. I gave my responses to the questions asked by the researchers revealing my feelings, thoughts, criticisms, and affirmations. As an insider in this process I know what it is like to feel as though I said too much, to wonder if someone will find out what I said, and to contemplate if anything will be done with all of the information. As a student I want all the dirty secrets to get discovered, for nothing to be hidden. I care about the consequences and want all wrongs to be righted.

But even as she takes on the role of participant, her role of researcher also affect her thoughts:

...I am also aware of the clock ticking which reminds me that I am not just a participant but also a researcher. I feel the weight of responsibility to help the facilitator of the focus group since I am also part of the research project. I know what (questions) will come next and that if time runs out before all questions are answered, data will be lost...(I wish) for the freedom that the (other) participants possess.

The difference in being a researcher and a participant are also present in how the researcher/participant analyzes the data

...a constant dilemma arose as I chose which quotes to use...to best highlight the themes. The themes seemed to be riddled with quotes from people I knew intimately so a struggle emerged...to resist the urge to use their quotes despite how they exemplified the themes. Consequently, I told myself that I couldn't disqualify the stories of those I knew well just because of my relationship with them.... I asked one of the researchers on the team to peer review these themes to make sure I did not give too much more weight to certain stories over others.

Finally, we were not prepared for direct questions from faculty pertaining to the focus group sessions and the topics discussed in the sessions. On the day of the first meeting, one faculty member stopped one of us in the hall and asked what was going on in the conference room. She said it looked like a graduate support group. The graduate student researcher told her that it was a focus group session with graduate students to get feedback on the department and their program. The faculty member said that she remembers hearing something about that. About a month and a half later, the same faculty member asked two of us, in separate research meetings, if a specific topic had come up in the focus group. We were taken off guard, but explained in a courteous manner that the information was confidential and that we could not discuss anything outside the research team. We believe that her intentions were good – she hoped that a particular area of concern would be addressed. Still, it placed both of us in a situation for which we were not prepared.

I (FP, the department head) did not expect confidentiality to be such a big issue. In my mind, participants were clearly allowed – even encouraged -- to feel and say whatever they wanted, good or bad, without repercussion. I initially wondered whether my co-authors' concerns and our participants' concerns about confidentiality were warranted. At the same time, the issues discussed were sensitive, and graduate students are clearly in a vulnerable position. Thus, in retrospect, it seems appropriate that we took a cautious position. Anyone planning a similar evaluation project would do well to plan for student concerns around confidentiality and how to respond to them.

Examples of Positive and Negative Feedback

We found both positive and negative feedback to be helpful. On the positive side, for example, graduate students appreciated the professional socialization they were receiving. One example they gave was the many opportunities to be a part of a research team.

There are a lot of opportunities here and if you want to get involved in research, there are many ways that you can do that...[In] my experience, people are very willing to let you be a part of their research projects and help them with their research.

Similarly, one student believed that, “seeing professors committed to their own research has been really helpful” in her growth as a researcher. Such feedback let the faculty know that they were succeeding in providing positive research experiences for the students.

Even the negative feedback was helpful in that it provided specific areas for the department head and faculty to be aware of and address. For example, we found that doctoral students believed that the deadline for choosing committee members is too early in the program. A typical response was, “I did not know them (faculty) well enough to be asking them to be on my committee. And in some respect, I have had a horrible experience with my advisor because I did not know her well enough.” Also, most doctoral students contended that it is not as easy as the faculty say it is to take someone off once they are on your committee. One student, for example, said that she “tried to ask someone to step down and that person refused.”

The university mandates that temporary committees be formed early – by the time a student takes 15 hours. Still, we were able to address this concern in several ways. The department head included this issue in his orientation of new graduate students, explaining the need to get to know as many faculty as soon as possible. Also, a new required professional seminar attended by both students and faculty addressed this concern by giving students the opportunity to get to know faculty early in their academic career. Finally, in sharing the evaluation we made them aware of the importance of allowing students to choose their own committee, and to make changes in their committee without undue influence from faculty.

There were concerns that also highlighted misunderstandings that we could address. For example, several misunderstandings arose regarding assistantship assignment (which we handle through a departmental committee). Many students were surprised, for example, with the expectations associated with the number of hours they were expected to work. One stated:

(I) did not expect to have to clock in and do twenty or forty hours of work...I think that was a surprise because I had heard that assistantships were more ...(simply) financial aid at other universities and not a full time job.

Another student believed she was expected to work more hours than she was being paid for. In addition, one student stated that her assistantship disrupted the work she had to do for her classes.

The above issues were addressed in several ways. The chair of the assistantship committee was made aware of the above concerns. Also, the department head informed both faculty and students (in multiple contexts) that no student is required to work more hours than he or she is being paid for. Also, the department head made sure in the fall orientation that new graduate students were aware that they were, in fact, required to put in their assigned hours. He also informed them that, while efforts will be made to fit student experience with assistantship needs, this is not always possible, and shouldn't be expected.

Highly Negative Feedback

When we asked about students' opinions regarding faculty teaching, while most comments were positive, the feedback from participants in one specific area was particularly critical. We decided that, there might be some problems if we included this information in our final report to the faculty. That is, it could shame the faculty from the area identified and might even generate some negative backlash from faculty in other program areas. At the same time, the faculty in the program area needed this information to discuss as they consider what changes it might suggest for their program. We decided to state in the final report that, "Some program-specific comments on teaching emerged in the focus group discussions. These will be shared with the program faculty and not with the entire department." The department head subsequently did this.

The Elephant in the Living Room

Perhaps the most sensitive topic to be raised by the graduate student participants was what a number of participants experienced as a lack of cohesion among faculty. One graduate student stated, "...there seems to be a big division of faculty and it is really hard as a student to find cohesion." Another graduate student expressed similar concern: "I heard a lot of faculty make derogatory remarks and aren't supportive of faculty just because they don't agree with them." Finally, another stated, "I have become much more aware of the politics and pitting programs against one another this year, and I think it is really sad."

Graduate students in every program expressed concern that there was specific animosity toward one specific program. "It's pretty blatant," said one participant. We discussed how to raise this issue in our report in a way that could be positive and helpful. We decided that the most helpful thing we could do was to share this finding as straightforwardly as any other with the hope that the faculty would become aware that the students see and do not like these divisions. In our final report, we wrote:

As for the divisions among the faculty, we encourage faculty to address this issue directly and honestly. It is an elephant in the living room that everyone sees but doesn't mention. We feel awkward when a faculty member or group puts down another in front of us. It shouldn't happen, and students certainly should not be brought into the middle of these issues. Such divisions and negative comments diminish us all, and certainly do not reflect well on the faculty or the department.

The department head also promised to raise this issue in a faculty meeting and ask the faculty for their help in addressing it.

What We Did With the Findings

Our initial objective was simply to conduct the focus groups so that the department head could learn more about graduate student perceptions of our department so he would know what to focus on in the coming year. That is, he hadn't planned to share the results in any formal way. However, the more we discussed the results, the

more we became convinced that both faculty and students would benefit from getting a copy of our final report. Consequently, we e-mailed the 18-page focus group report to all faculty and graduate students in the form of an e-mail attachment.

The concerns expressed are being addressed in a number of ways. Some are being addressed just by the fact that the faculty know about them. The department head will raise some in his orientation of new students (e.g., assistantship process and expectations), and will ask certain departmental committees to address others (e.g., participants' suggestion of a graduate student buddy system). In fact, the departmental graduate committee recently dropped as a requirement a research course that the focus group participants found problematic. Also, some issues are being addressed through the new professional seminar (e.g., more student-faculty interaction) and others have been addressed through special meetings (e.g., a primer on plans of study). Still others are making their way onto faculty meeting agendas (e.g., the perceived divisions among the faculty).

Conclusion

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1970) discusses the importance of honoring the knowledge and experience of people who typically do not have a voice. We have done that in this focus group evaluation. We have given voice to graduate students who often feel more like ping pong balls than paddles. When marginalized groups – like graduate students – take part in examining their own situations and in generating plans to address problems, they both produce useful information and feel empowered in the process. We also see this focus group interview as an important feedback loop that any program can benefit from. We plan to use focus group evaluations in the future and recommend them to others who want first-hand feedback on how their organization is meeting its goals.

We learned several practical lessons throughout the process of this focus group project. First, in the future we will provide more alternative times for the focus groups to be held. Second, in the future we will approach graduate students face-to-face in order to recruit them for participation. (We learned that some graduate students did not bother to read the group e-mails or respond to them.) Finally, to prevent faculty from seeing who participates in the focus groups, we plan to hold future focus groups off campus or in another building on campus.

All programs need to know what they are doing well and what they need to change. Both kinds of information strengthen organizations. As we discuss above, the process is not without its challenges. However, we believe that the rewards outweigh the challenges. We hope that our experience will help others undertake a similar process of understanding and strengthening their own departments and programs.

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Appendix A

Questions for Graduate Students: Evaluation of Department of Human Development

Purpose: To obtain a general sense of student perceptions of their experiences within the Department of Human Development. We are interested in understanding the departmental strengths and areas of concern from the vantage point of graduate students in the department. We hope that the information that comes from these focus groups might inform faculty efforts to improve the department.

What will be done with the information? We will analyze the information by identifying the themes, and look for quotes that represent or highlight these themes. We will also write up a summary of the themes and give this summary to Dr. Piercy, who will use what you say to better understand what's going on in the department from your point of view. What you say will inform him in terms of potential changes that he might initiate within the department. Also, we will give a summary of the themes to the Graduate Policies Committee to let them know about your experiences and opinions within the department. Basically, the faculty believe it is good to know what students are thinking, and how they experience the department. It's through feedback mechanisms like this that meaningful change occurs.

1. If you could think of a metaphor or draw a picture that captures some aspect of your experience of the department and explain what it means to you.
2. What are some positive aspects of the department?
3. What are some things about the department that you would like to see changed?
4. How are some of your experiences in Human Development been like or unlike your initial expectations?
5. Imagine yourself at your graduation. As you look back, what will be your fondest memory? What will be your biggest disappointment?
6. How do you feel about the degree to which your program prepared you for your career goals?
7. What things that you've said today should we emphasize when we write up the results of this evaluation?
8. What was this focus experience like for you?
9. (If time) Would you share your experiences or comment on the following:

- A. The relationship between faculty and students
- B. The relationship between students
- C. The relationship among faculty members
- D. The quality of the teaching
- E. The quality of the research training
- F. The advising and mentoring you have received
- G. The overall quality of the faculty
- H. The competencies of your fellow students
- I. Your preparation for securing the kind of employment that you aspire to
- J. Dissertation process
- K. Gender and cultural issues
- L. Student stress
- M. The comprehensive or preliminary exam process
- N. Teaching experience and opportunity

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