Assessing Education Needs at Tertiary Level: The Focus Group Method

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Abstract
The goal of the paper is to point out the advantages and disadvantages of the focus group method in assessing the education needs of teachers and students in veterinary medicine. It is the first stage of a wider research aiming at developing problem-based teaching and learning methodologies in the field of veterinary medicine. The materials used consisted of literature documents on focus group as a research method in social sciences. The authors studied the literature available in the field and synthesised its main advantages and disadvantages. The paper is the first of this kind in Romania. Results show that there is no agreement yet on the advantages and disadvantages of this method. The research limitation is that there is almost no Romanian literature on focus group as a method. The usefulness of the paper is obvious: it allows other researchers in the field of education see the benefits of using such a research method. The originality of the paper consists in the fact that there has been no such research so far in Romanian higher education. Based on the results of the focus groups organised, the authors will design and implement a problem-based learning methodology for the students in veterinary medicine.

Keywords: assessment, education needs, focus group method, students, tertiary level, and veterinary medicine.

1. Introduction

A focus group is defined as “collective activity” by Powell et al. in Gibbs [1]; as “informal discussion among a group of selected individuals about a particular topic” by Wilkinson, in Liamputtong [2]; as an “interaction” and “organised discussion” by Kitzinger in Gibbs [1]; as “small collection of individuals with common characteristics who are brought together to respond to [open-ended and closed] questions on a particular topic” by Moore et al., [3]; as “social event” by Goss and Leinbach, in Gibbs [1]; as direct assessment method by Osters and Tiu, [4]; group of approximately six to twelve people (in our case, two focus groups of ten people each) who share similar characteristics or common interests (Data Collection Methods for Program Evaluation: Focus Groups [5]; as “group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research” by Powell et al. in Gibbs [1]; as qualitative data collection method (i.e., the data is descriptive and cannot be measured numerically) (Data Collection Methods for Program Evaluation: Focus Groups [5]; as small group of six to ten people led through an open discussion by a skilled moderator (Guidelines for Conducting a Focus Group [6];

The focus group method is also referred to as a focus group interview or a group depth interview or a group interview discussed by Liamputtong [2].

Focus group methodology can be traced back in 1926, when it was used in social psychological research, but it is now regaining more popularity among academic researchers in the health and social sciences as discussed by Liamputtong [2].

The first medical research based on focus groups...
dates from 1996 as described by Powel and Single 1996, in Gibbs [1]. There are two broad types of focus groups: a structured approach (employed more in market research) and a less rigid and structured approach emerged from focus group research in the social sciences as discussed by Liamputtong [2]. A facilitator (facilitator in everything that follows) guides the group based on a predetermined set of topics. The facilitator creates a comfortable, enjoyable, non-threatening and permissive environment that encourages participants to share their perceptions and points of view. The most important features of a focus group are described by Liamputtong [2]:
- It enables in-depth discussions;
- It involves a relatively small number of people;
- It involves participants sharing the same social and cultural experiences (age, educational background, ethnicity, gender, religion, social class, etc.) or particular areas of concern (childbirth, childhood immunisation, contraception, diarrhoea, divorce, HIV/AIDS, infant feeding, marriage, mental health, motherhood, nutrition, problem-based teaching/learning, etc.);
- It is focused on a specific area of interest that allows participants to discuss the topic in greater detail;
- It is interactive: group processes assist people to explore and clarify their points of view;
- It provides good, accurate information.

Focus group as a method can be used in at least three cases:
- To get more in-depth information on attitudes, behaviours, beliefs, concerns, experiences, feelings, ideas, impressions, insights, needs, opinions, perceptions, points of view, reactions, stories, thoughts, understandings, values, or views – in a word, about what people think, how they think, and why they think the way they do about certain issues (i.e., to gather subjective perspectives from key stakeholders);
- To gather additional information as an adjunct to quantitative data collection methods (it provides interpretations of data collected through quantitative methods, data that are numeric and measurable);
- As part of a mixed method evaluation approach to increase the validity of evaluation findings by using a variety of data collection techniques.

2. Materials and methods

There are two key components of planning a focus group:
- Develop the focus group guide, i.e. a series of open-ended and closed questions and prompts for the facilitator to use (a “road map” and memory aid for the facilitator), in which the facilitator identified from whom to obtain information (teachers or students), what type of information to obtain, and what use he/she has for the information; the facilitator asks open-ended and closed questions of the group and allows time for participants to talk to each other instead of answering the facilitator’s open-ended and closed questions;
- Select the number and type of participants for each focus group to encourage response to the research questions through homogeneity in backgrounds but not in homogeneity in attitudes, avoiding selecting friends: the participants are chosen that possess similar characteristics or levels of understanding about the topic (teachers and students). Selection is done through existing social networks.

3. Results and discussion

One has to bear in mind six key aspects regarding focus groups:
- We need a facilitator, a note taker and a technician: a facilitator to guide the group through the discussion and keep the group focused on the topics for discussion: his/her primary aim is to facilitate discussion rather than to direct it (given that the aim of focus groups in social science research is to understand the participants’ meanings and interpretations) and not to reach consensus as discussed by Liamputtong [2]; a note taker who takes notes (that include a sense of what each person says, identify how comments are said, and record when transitions occur from one topic to the next), i.e. observed without
interacting with the group; a technician who records the focus groups for the transcription of the event.

- We conduct our focus groups in person, the ideal option (phone or web conferencing could have been alternative solutions);
- We take measures for the focus groups to last only 90 minutes (the minimum is 60 and the maximum is 90 minutes);
- We pay attention to adjust open-ended and closed questions to the type of participants, varying the open-ended and closed questions and the manner in which the two focus groups are facilitated based on the type of participants (teachers and students);
- We take into account the advantages of focus groups; thus, focus groups: allow participants to change their opinions; allow participants to develop their own questions and frameworks and to seek their own needs and concerns in their own words and on their own terms; allow participants to select the manner in which they will respond; allow the participants to take the initiative; allow researchers to access different everyday communication forms (arguments, jokes, recaptures of past events, teases); allow researchers to find out why an issue is salient and what is salient about it; are quick; are relatively easy to set up; are valuable due to the richness of the data and the range of possible responses; can be used in different settings; can be used with a wide range of people and groups; can develop trust; can empower the participants due to the opportunity to be involved in decision-making processes, to be valued as experts, and to be given the chance to work collaboratively with researchers; can generate complex information; can generate information at low cost; can generate information with the minimum amount of time; can take any form of wording; elicit a multiplicity of views and emotional processes; encourage interaction among participants; gain insight into topics that may be more difficult to gather through other data collection methods; make use of group dynamics; may include ideas not yet conceived of by the facilitator; may suit people who cannot articulate their thoughts easily, people with “little or no societal voice” cited by Liamputtong [2]; offer possibilities for researchers to explore “the gap between people say and what they do” by Conradson, in Liamputtong [2]; provide collective power to marginalised people; provide the opportunity for synergistic insights on the topic; provide useful information (due to the group dynamics) that individual data collection cannot provide;
- We took into account the disadvantages of focus groups; thus, focus groups: are a low-level research approach; are not fully confidential (the participants hear what the others say) or anonymous (the facilitators/investigators/moderators/researchers know who’s who and what they said); are susceptible to facilitator bias; are time consuming because of the planning in advance and of data analysis; can be difficult to assemble; cannot be entirely predetermined; do not provide information representative for other groups; do not provide valid information at individual level; may allow a few individuals to dominate or sidetrack the discussion; may allow certain personalities (dominant and aggressive) influence the group discussion; may be difficult to conduct for topics where people have strong or opposing opinions; may be intimidating; may hinder the researcher’s clear identification of individual messages in a specific context; may inhibit the participants in institutional contexts; may limit the researcher’s control over the data; may not be appropriate if the objective of the research is to generate in-depth personal narratives; may not be sufficiently in-depth to allow the researchers to gain a good understanding of the participants’ experiences; may not determine the participants to take part actively in the discussion; may not suit topics that are too personal; only offer a shallow understanding of an issue.

4. Conclusions

Focus groups aim mainly at assessing the needs of both teachers and students for preferred delivery methods. We believe this is the most necessary but overlooked step in professional education programme planning since it may aid in constructing an educational programme through brainstorming and consensus building.
We need to observe the parameters for focus group development set by Merton and Kendall in Gibbs [1]: participants have a specific experience (teachers and students in veterinary medicine) of or opinion about the topic under investigation; an explicit interview guide is used; the subjective experiences of participants are explored in relation to predetermined research questions.

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References


