Assessing the Needs of Students in Veterinary Medicine for Preferred Delivery Methods: Focus Group

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Abstract

The goal of the paper is to presents the results of a focus group with students in veterinary medicine, asked about their preferred delivery methods. The research is a preliminary one in a longer series of studies dedicated to the design and implementation of a problem-based learning methodology for the students. The materials used consisted in a series of questions that were submitted for debate during a focus group organised with 12 students in veterinary medicine. The method used was the focus group. The degree of novelty of the paper is high. Results show that students in veterinary medicine have already used problem-based learning without even knowing it. The research limitations consist in the fact that the authors organised the focus group on a small sample of students. The usefulness of the paper consists in the fact that it will help other academics see better through the eyes of their students and try to meet their expectations. The originality of the paper is real: there has been no such research in Romanian higher education in veterinary medicine. The importance of the paper resides in its disclosure of facts and feelings unknown to both the authors of the paper and readers.

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

1. Introduction

A **focus group** or a **focus group interview** or a **group depth interview** or a **group interview** as discussed by Liamputtong [1] is defined as a "collective activity" by Powell et al. 1996, and approached by Gibbs [2]; as an "informal discussion among a group of selected individuals about a particular topic" by Wilkinson 2004, in Liamputtong [1]; as an "interaction" by Kitzinger 1995, in Gibbs [2]; as an "organised discussion" by Kitzinger 1994, in Gibbs [2]; as a "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 a "social event" by Goss and Leinbach 1996, in Gibbs [2]; as a direct assessment method by Osters and Tiu [4]; as a *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 a "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. 1996, in Gibbs [2]; as a 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 a small group of six to ten people led through an open discussion by a skilled moderator (*Guidelines for Conducting a Focus Group* [6].

Focus group methodology was first used in 1926 in social psychological research, but it is now regaining more popularity among academic researchers in the health and social sciences, as discussed by Liamputtong [1]: the first medical research based on focus groups dates from 1996 as

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was Powel and Single 1996, discussed in Gibbs [2].

A facilitator/investigator/moderator/researcher (a facilitator, in everything that follows) guides the group based on a predetermined set of topics creating a comfortable, enjoyable, non-threatening and permissive environment that encourages participants to share their perceptions and points of view.

A focus group as Liamputtong sustained [1] enables in-depth discussions; involves a relatively small number of people; 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.); is focused on a specific area of interest that allows participants to discuss the topic in greater detail; is interactive: group processes assist people to explore and clarify their points of view; and 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 numeric and measurable data collected through quantitative methods): if a programme uses a log to track the number and type of teachers training veterinary doctors and of students trained to become veterinary doctors, we can use a questionnaire to measure how the teachers use a certain teaching method in their work, what they believe are the benefits of the method, and what insights they have about how the training could be improved;
- *As part of a mixed method evaluation approach to increase the validity of evaluation findings.*

2. Materials and methods

We planned *our focus group* as follows:

- *We developed the focus group guide,* i.e. a series of open-ended 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 (in our case, the students), what type of information to obtain, and how to use the information; the facilitator asks open-ended questions of the group and allows time for participants to talk to each other instead of answering the open-ended and questions;
- *We selected the number and type of participants for our focus group* to encourage response to the research questions through homogeneity in backgrounds but not in homogeneity in attitudes, avoiding selecting friends: the participants were chosen that possessed similar characteristics or levels of understanding about the topic (students). Selection was done through existing social networks.

We observed *six key aspects regarding focus groups*:

- *We needed 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: *her primary aim was to facilitate discussion rather than to direct it and not to reach consensus* [1]; *a note taker* who took notes, i.e. observed without interacting with the group; and *a technician* who recorded the focus group for the transcription of the event.
- *We conducted our focus group in person*;
- *We took measures for the focus groups to last only 90 minutes*;
- *We paid attention to adjust open-ended questions to the type of participants*, varying the open-ended questions and the manner in which the focus groups was facilitated based on the type of participants (students);
- *We took into account both advantages and disadvantages of the focus group*.

We developed the focus group questionnaire using only one as sustained in *Guidelines for Conducting a Focus Group* [6], basic question type as mentioned in *Focus Group Questionnaire Fundamentals – Basic Questions* [7]: ***open-ended questions***, questions that do not impose answers or limit expression (they start conversations and keep them going, allowing people to answer in any way they see fit); they can be *true questions* (*What ... do you...?*) or *imperatives* (*Please, tell me what...you...*).

We took care that our questions be focused on one dimension each; non-embarrassing; non-threatening; open-ended or sentence-completion types; short; to the point; unambiguously worded.

During the focus group sessions, the facilitators proved to have good interpersonal skills and personal qualities, and good, non-judgemental, adaptable listeners. They:

- avoided giving personal opinions to not influence participants towards any particular position or opinion;
- challenged participants to draw out differences and tease out a diverse range of meanings on the topic;
- ensured everyone participated and got a chance to speak;
- helped the participants feel at ease and facilitated interaction between the participants;
- kept the session focused, steering the conversation back on course;
- probed for details and moved things forward when the conversation drifted or reached minor conclusions;
- took care not to show too much approval to avoid favouring particular participants.

The final questions we asked our focus group (students) are stated below together with the answers supplied by our respondents.

3. Results and discussion

Immediately after all participants left, the facilitator and her assistant debriefed while the recorder was still running and all the tapes and notes were labelled with the date, time and name of the group.

Data analysis was done following the steps below; thus, analysts:

- Transcribed all focus group tapes;
- Inserted notes into transcribed material where appropriate;
- Cleaned up transcripts by stripping off non-essential words;
- Assigned each participant comment/quote a separate line on the page and each new thought or idea therein;
- Labelled each line with the participant number (e.g., a comment from participant 6 was assigned the number 6);
- Each line was entered into an Excel database.

Below are the questions and the answers supplied by our students:

- **Question 1: Have you ever heard about Problem-based learning (PBL)?** The students gave no answer, which is not surprising at all.
- **Question 2: How would you define problem-based learning instructional strategy?** The students answered it is a **heuristic method** (12); it **opposes classical learning methods** (based on memory) (8); it relies on **knowledge** (1); it starts from a case that you need to diagnose (2); it starts from some symptoms that you are asked to correlate with a certain condition (4). **After hearing the definition, the students realised they had been taught according to the principles of problem-based learning without being aware of it. They identified three main features of problem-based learning (a heuristic, modern learning method based on prior knowledge).**
- **Question 3: Have you ever tried to learn according to the Problem-based learning instructional strategy?** The respondents answered YES and detailed: as a **team** member, trying to **solve a problem** (8); I used it trying to **avoid memorisation** (12); they [teachers] simulated a case in an attempt to make us avoid future mistakes (9); we were asked to diagnose an animal (3); we were asked to neuter an animal with the risk of making a mistake to try and see afterwards what went wrong and how we could have avoided it (2); **w**hile learning, I appealed to true cases (4). **Students identified some of the keywords in problem-based learning (avoid memorisation, solve problems).**
- **Question 4: How do you imagine learning according to the problem-based learning instructional strategy?** Answers: it allows us

to **compare different stages of a disease** (5, 4, 8); it **confronts us with imaginary or concrete cases** (2, 7, 6, 10, 11, 1, 3); it **makes us imagine cases** and then **try to solve them** (4, 9); it **makes us work in teams** (4); **i**t **requires previous knowledge** (9, 5, 6, and 7). **Students understood that, in addition to appealing to prior knowledge, problem-based learning can bring about something new: compare things, confront with imaginary or real cases, imagine cases, make them work in teams, try to solve cases.**

- **Question 5: What about your previous learning activities – could you describe them rather as problem solving than learning knowledge activities? Why?** All the respondents agreed that both theoretical knowledge and practical skills are necessary; there is hardly one subject area where problem-based learning cannot be used, and say that they needed a little bit more imagination (from both teachers and students); more correlation between theory and practice; more interactivity in both class and laboratory/clinic. **Students did not really identify their previous learning activities as problem solving or learning knowledge, but their opinions reveal much more important things.**
- **Question 6: Would you be able to act more responsibly in your learning? Why?** All the respondents said they would be able to take most of responsibility for their learning (because **being a vet requires a lot of responsibility** (10) provided they could do anything (12); they gave up mechanical learning (memorising) (5); they had more knowledge (3, 4); they made more efforts (8); they were able to choose (11); they were aware of it (5); they were more confident (6, 9); they were more courageous (6); they were more motivated (8); they were more responsible (7); they were taught to think freely (2); they were trained to be so (3). **Respondent 10 gave the best answer here.**
- **Question 7: Would you like to learn more in groups/teams instead individually? Why?** All the respondents said YES because everybody **can defend his/her own position** (2); everybody **can exchange information** (6); it **enhances competitiveness** (4); it is **easier to learn** this way (10); it is important to be part of a team (9); **responsibility is shared** (4), provided everybody can **make mistakes without being blamed** for it (11); everybody **completed everybody** (4, 5, 9); everybody **did his/her best** (2); team members **learned to work as a team** (12); team members were compatible (1, 3); the teams were homogeneous (7). **Students pointed out to the best assets of team work (defending one's own position, exchanging information, enhancing competitiveness, making learning easier, sharing responsibility).**
- **Question 8: Are you interested to participate in the projects pilot trainings? Why?** All the respondents said YES because it is an **opportunity to learn** (11), provided they had to **compete** with the others (2); they had to **compete** with themselves (1, 3); they were asked to **solve true problems** (4); they were made to **act as a group** (6); they were **taught how to learn** (2). **Student 11 gave the best answer.**

4. Conclusions

A summary was written following the debriefing.
The summary was reviewed to identify potential trends or patterns.
The analysts read the transcript and marked sections related to specific research questions.
The analyst re-read the transcripts and concentrated on responses to one research question at a time.
Interpretation aimed at answering the question "What do the responses mean in the context of research question?" by using what was said, what was not said, body language, and experience in the group.
The answers supplied by the students in our focus group allow us to draw the following conclusions regarding the adoption of problem-based learning in the teaching of veterinary medicine:

- It would be beneficial to use problem-based learning more in teaching veterinary medicine students.
- Students advanced two examples of problem-based learning in veterinary medicine, which shows that it would be easy to use this method in the teaching of this subject area.

- The examples of problem-based learning instructional strategy experienced show that students identified the concept properly: they understood they had been invited into the learning process.
- It is encouraging that students were able to figure out the advantages of problem-based learning.
- Students were aware that both knowledge and skills are necessary. They stated that they would like their learning activities to rely more on imagination, to better link theory to practice and to bring more interactivity in class/lab – all of which is an indirect critique against classical learning methods.
- Students did not answer why they thought they would be able to act more responsibly in their learning but they said they wished they were more confident, more conscious, more courageous, more motivated; that they could do anything, give up memorisation, have more knowledge, make choices, make more efforts; that they were taught to think freely and be more responsible.
- Team work is good because one can make mistakes without being blamed for it, because team members can complete each other, can do their best, and learn to act as team members.
- On the contrary, team members' compatibility and team homogeneity are not desirable pedagogically.
- Students wished they had the opportunity of competing with themselves and with the others, of solving true problems, of acting as a group and of being taught how to learn according to problem-based learning principles.

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