

How students' needs inform learning design practice: a report on a series of focus-group interviews for the Department of Business Management

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the focus-group interview technique as a valuable means of evaluating learning materials from the student's perspective. The process of designing, organising and conducting a series of focus group interviews is discussed. The general trends evident from the interviews are identified. Lastly, some recommendations are offered on how to improve the learning materials under review.

OPSOMMING

Hierdie artikel bied die fokus groep onderhoud aan as 'n waardevolle instrument vir die evaluering van leer materiaal uit die student se perspektief. Die proses van die ontwerp, organisering en voer van die fokusgroeponderhoude word bespreek. Sekere algemene tendense word uit die resultate geïdentifiseer. Laastens word aanbevelings gemaak oor hoe om die onderrigmateriaal te verbeter.

INTRODUCTION

Owing to the unique nature of open-distance learning, the focus-group interview (fgi) has proved to be a very useful technique in researching problem areas, such as the quality of the learning materials. This article explains and elaborates on the process of using a series of fgis as a research technique in evaluating learning materials. Some general findings in respect of the series of fgis conducted are highlighted, and recommendations on how to resolve problem areas are offered.

PREPARING FOR THE FGIS

Early in 2000, members of the Unisa Department of Business Management initiated a series discussions with the Bureau for University Teaching about the possibility of using focus-group interviews (fgis) to assist them in the evaluation of their modules. The Bureau has an instructional design function and uses focus-group interviews to obtain first-hand information from the learners on the quality and effectiveness of learning materials (Lederman 1990; Rowntree 1992; Barnard & Venter 1996; Lockwood 1998).

The series of fgis were planned and logistical and administrative procedures were discussed. Modules were selected for evaluation (two modules per each undergraduate year level) and dates were allocated for each interview. The relevant lecturers were informed of what was expected of them.

Some of the tasks given to them included recruiting participants from the Gauteng area by using a list obtained from Computer Services of students in the area who were registered for the required modules. Student names were randomly selected and these students were phoned and invited to participate in the interviews. Recruitment ended once there were 20 students for each fgi. (Note that the fgi is a qualitative research technique where representivity does not carry the same weight in determining reliability as it does in the case of statistical or quantitative research methods.)

Other tasks included organising the installation of video cameras and other audio-visual equipment, arranging for refreshments to be served during the interviews and arranging for the payment of a small honorarium to the participants.

The lecturers involved decided on the discussion outline which was to be used in the fgis. A standard discussion outline was compiled, except in the case of the fgi with MNG201-6 students where an adapted discussion outline was to be used. (Please see addendum.)

Two modules on each of the three undergraduate year levels were identified, which meant that a total of six fgis would be held. The six fgis took place during June and July of 2000.

All the fgis took place in TAC 1 of the Theo van Wijk building and were conducted between 09h00 and 11h30 in the mornings. Refreshments were served at 10h30. The participants received a small honorarium after the fgis were completed.

PURPOSE

The purpose of the series of fgi was to gather information on the students' evaluation of the quality of the six selected modules. They were asked to evaluate the relevance, user-friendliness, accessibility, learner support, workload and effectiveness of the assessment system. In essence, the idea was to obtain first-hand information from the participants on their experience of the total learning design of the materials. The feedback from the students would make it possible to identify main or general problem areas and other issues related to current teaching and learning practice.

According to Brotherson and Goldstein (1992), the focus group is designed to elicit multiple perspectives and is best suited to addressing questions that inform or assess policy and practice. Schurink, Schurink and Poggenpoel (1998) summarise the various definitions of the focus group by describing it as a purposive discussion of a specific topic or related topics taking place between eight to ten individuals with a similar background and common interests. They explain that the group interaction will consist of verbal and non-verbal communication and an interplay between the different perceptions and opinions of the participants that will thereby stimulate discussion without necessarily modifying or changing the ideas and opinions of the participating individuals.

By using the fgi as a qualitative research technique, the participants were given the opportunity freely and openly to share their experiences, beliefs and opinions in respect of the selected modules. The moderator facilitated the discussions by using the discussion outline as guide (Schurink, Schurink & Poggenpoel 1998), and by following accepted fgi rules and adhering to small-group discussion norms (Krueger 1994; Stewart & Shamdasani 1990; Morgan 1993).

CONDUCTING THE FGIS

The venue was set up and the cameras installed (except in the case of the first interview when the camera was not yet available) prior to the fgis. (See Schurink, Schurink & Poggenpoel (1998:327) for a full discussion of the merits of filming fgis). The participants were welcomed by members of the Department and asked to take their seats. The members of the Department then left the room and the moderator took over.

To get the ball rolling, the moderator introduced herself and briefly explained the purpose of the fgi. Permission was obtained from all participants to record the session on video tape. All participants were assured that their anonymity would be protected. Next, the participants were requested to introduce themselves. Afrikaans-speaking participants were free to use their mother tongue if they preferred to do so. In such cases, the moderator translated for the rest of the group.

The discussion outlines were used largely to facilitate the discussion. In many cases, the discussions naturally flowed from the one point in the discussion outline to the next point. Where this did not happen, the moderator would intervene to bring the discussion back on track. The moderator sometimes found it necessary to paraphrase the participants' words to ensure that the meaning had been correctly interpreted. In general, considerable probing was necessary in order to gain a deeper understanding of the contributions made by the participants. For instance, it was necessary to clarify why certain students found aspects of a particular module difficult but others did not or why some students found a module to be relevant to their working situations while others found it to be irrelevant.

At the end of discussions, the participants were asked to provide the moderator with their fax numbers or e-mail addresses so that the relevant draft report could be made available to them for their comments or suggestions on the validity of the report. This strategy is called member checking (Schurink, Schurink & Poggenpoel 1998:331) and is recommended as one way of establishing the accuracy with which responses were recorded. All participants who provided correct fax numbers or e-mail addresses received a draft copy of the relevant report for their critique or suggestions.

Before the reports could be drawn up, the video-recordings had to be viewed. All responses were transcribed and notes were made on how the nonverbal communication confirmed or contradicted the responses. This comprehensive summary of all the responses was analysed and the responses were then grouped into logical categories. The individual draft reports included discussions of the above-mentioned categories and also included recommendations on how the particular modules could be improved.

A few participants responded to the drafts by pointing out minor things not included in the particular reports. The majority of the participants agreed that the individual draft reports provided an accurate and valid account of what had happened at the different sessions. All comments or suggestions received by the moderator were worked into the final reports. The reports were submitted to the Department at the end of July.

FINDINGS

The findings in respect of each fgi were included in the individual reports. The findings identified the problems students experienced in each particular module. (These reports can be requested from the Department should they be required.)

It would be worthwhile to consider the following general trends or problem areas that emerged from the six different fgis.

- The students indicated that they would prefer practical courses as opposed to theory-based courses.
- Related to the above-mentioned need for practical modules was the need students expressed for built-in interactivity, guidance and feedback, and proper self-assessment opportunities.
- It seemed that not all of the students possessed the necessary reading, writing and examination-taking skills required to master the modules.
- It soon became evident from all the fgis that students from all student populations experienced a lack of effective student support.
- The students preferred clearly structured modules which supported the achievement of the expected outcomes.
- Some students regarded the inclusion of prescribed books in the study package as unnecessary, especially when the guide paraphrased the textbook.
- The students enjoyed visual elements of a study guide which contributed to its accessibility.
- The students regarded their assignments as important learning tools, especially when the activities in the text, the assignments and the examinations corresponded and

when they received adequate feedback on the activities and the assignments to help them prepare for the examinations.

- Students seemed to have had problems with multiple-choice questions (MCQs). They regarded some of the questions as being difficult to understand and were not always sure of what was required of them. In many cases they regarded the assessment value of the MCQs as limited since they did not cover the entire module and did not allow them to demonstrate all of their knowledge. They also indicated that they would have liked to answer more questions requiring them to demonstrate the application of their knowledge.
- The students indicated that they would like to have an overview of what each module entails and how the different modules fit together.
- The third-year students indicated that the purpose of their modules, especially the specialisation modules, needed to be translated into specific outcomes which would reflect the needs of the particular target audience, for instance the needs of those focussing on labour relations or training.
- The faculty brochures needed to provide more information on the modules, specifically stating who the expected target audience was.
- The students who were also registered in other faculties, especially the Information Science students, experienced severe workload problems during their examination times when they were required to submit assignments for year courses at the same time that they were being examined on the modules.
- The students appreciated the opportunity to express their views and make a contribution to improving the modules.
- The students appreciated the fact that customer satisfaction is important to the University and the Department.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above, the following general recommendations can be made to improve the courses.

It is necessary to re-visit and revise the overall teaching strategy or learning plan used by the Department. Instructional designers may be called in to assist in developing a flexible teaching model that will address distance learning challenges such as

- a learner-centred design (Rowntree 1994; Lockwood 1998; Mackintosh 1999)
- the relevance and applicability of materials (van Heerden 1995; Frymier & Shulman 1995; Dickinson 2000)
- the recognition of prior learning (Geyser 1999; Harris 1999)
- outcomes-based education (Goodwin-Davey & Davey 2000)
- student support (Rowntree 1992; Kuhn & Williams 1997; Carnwell 2000)
- diverse student needs (Gibbons 1998)
- assessment which facilitates learning (Hendricks 1997; Morgan & O'Reilly 1999)

It is crucial that there is a planned progression in and, development of, the necessary reading, writing and examination-taking skills from year to year. Where first- and second-year students are required only to complete MCQ questions for assignments and examinations but they are required to write essay questions at third-year level, the gap needs to be closed by facilitating the development and assessment of the necessary skills.

The participants' contributions made it clear that an external audit and evaluation of all assessment tools, that is MCQs and essays, are warranted. It is not only necessary to evaluate the content and scope of the items, but also the validity and other technical aspects related to the quality of the items (Bak 1990; Heese 1990).

It is recommended that the overall assessment policy be critically evaluated in terms of the requirements of outcomes-based education. The assessment system needs to correspond with and nurture the expected outcomes for each module (Morgan & O'Reilly 1999).

Therefore the inclusion of a portfolio assessment strategy is a viable possibility for some of the advanced modules. Students may be required to compile a complete set of records that document, demonstrate and illustrate their acquired skills, as well as their ability to reflect on their learning (Paulson, Paulson & Meyer 1991).

There seems to be a general lack of coordination between faculties. In this particular case, attention needs to be paid to Information Science students who experienced workload problems by having to submit assignments for one faculty whilst having to prepare or write examinations for another.

An evaluation plan should be developed to provide for continuous internal and external evaluation of all learning materials (Thorpe 1988). Such an evaluation plan needs to include a situation analysis, a students' needs analysis, a curriculum review and a teaching critique.

CONCLUSION

The process of conducting a series of six fgjs for the Department proved to be highly rewarding in terms of the amount and depth of information uncovered by acknowledging the students' needs. The Department of Business Management should be applauded for recognising and addressing student needs. The inductive approach of listening to students' concerns about, and experiences of, learning materials to inform instructional design decisions, signals a transformation of the teaching approach to become more learner-centred and answers the call to produce graduates with transferable work and life skills.

* You may contact the author at ventea@unisa.ac.za or tel +27 12 429-6691 to obtain copies of the individual fgi reports.

ADDENDUM

Discussion Outline

1. Did the content of the module meet your expectations? 2. Did you find the study material (study guide/audio tapes) clear and understandable with respect to

- (a) language?
- (b) conceptually?
- (c) assessment?

3. Is the layout/format of the study guide effective?

4. Do you consider assignments as important?

5. Do you think assignments should be compulsory or not? If not, what alternative do you propose?

6. How much time did you spend on

- (a) familiarising yourself with the contents of the module?
- (b) assignments?
- (c) preparation for the exam?

7. Do you think you received support from the lecturing staff in respect of

- (a) guidance?
- (b) feedback on assignments?
- (c) guidelines in preparing for the exam?
- (d) availability of lecturers?

8. How did you find the prescribed textbook in respect of

- (a) readability?
- (b) affordability?
- (c) accessibility?
- (d) user-friendliness?
- (e) amount of work to study?
- (f) alignment with the study guide?

9. Do you consider the exam to be aligned with the study material?

10. How much time did you need to complete this module?

11. How did this module compare with the other first-year module? (This question was relevant only to the second first-year level focus group.)

12. Are there any areas of concern which you would like to share with us?

Adapted Discussion Outline

QUESTIONS	TRY TO FIND OUT
1. Did the content of the module meet your expectations?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Of value to your professional development? • In touch with realities of business environment?
2. Did you find the study guide clear and understandable?	<p>Rate the study guide in terms of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the manner in which the information is unpacked; is it interesting and supplementary, but not a paraphrase of the information in the textbook? • the effective use of simplified examples • the use of real examples from the business world: enough, more or less needed? • the effective use of case studies • adequate feedback on the case studies in the study guide (explanations) • the use of activities - helpful to understand material better? • self-test questions • summaries of the most important theoretical concepts - do you use them for studying purposes?
3. Is the layout of the study guide effective?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • professional and user-friendly? • use of margins to highlight important aspects of the work?
4. Do you consider assignments to be important?	Did you complete the assignments? If you did, did you find them

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • easy or difficult? • of value to understand subject matter better? • of assistance in the examination? • enough/not enough MCQs? • filled with practical application questions? <p>Feedback on assignment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • satisfactory/unsatisfactory? • comprehensive enough? • explanations clear?
5 Do you think assignments should be compulsory or not?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If yes, how many? • Do you think the marks obtained in compulsory assignments should count as part of the final mark obtained for the module? • How do you feel about present system where you have to evaluate your own work?
6 How much time	
7 Do you think you received support.....	
8 Textbook.....	
9 Do you consider the exam to be aligned with the study material?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was the exam paper fair, challenging or too easy? • What do you think about the MCQs on case studies in lieu of essay questions? Do the MCQs test ability to apply theory or should we include essays? • Did you perceive a clear relationship between the contents of the paper and the learning objectives stated in the study guide? • Do the activities in the study guide prepare students for the exam? • Guidelines on format of exam paper? • Did you contact lecturers prior to exam? Did you perceive them to be friendly/helpful/indifferent?
10 How much time.....	
11 Compare with first year.....	
12 Other areas of concern.....	

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