

Research Note: Using Text-based Focus Groups with Middle Eastern University Students

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Abstract

This paper shows how informative qualitative research into student perceptions and values can be carried out by studying how small groups of students (focus groups) respond to a text (such as a literary text or newspaper article), within a 'semi-structured' framework. The discussions are prompted and structured by the researchers' questions and prompts to elicit students' attitudes and experience, but the structure is flexible enough to give space for unforeseen answers and questions. The paper explains the role of the researcher/moderator and research assistant, and gives some suggestions for conducting focus groups based on this technique.

Introduction

In many higher education contexts in the Gulf region, educators are from a different culture from that of their students (Smith, 2007). In order to understand the context within which our students learn, we need to understand the current cultural norms of that society and how members of the society perceive them. Once we have a basis of knowledge of the perceived present we can monitor and record changes more effectively, and relate these to students' learning.

In the Autumn of 2004 a group of researchers at Zayed University conducted a survey entitled 'Culture, Education and You' on the Dubai and Abu Dhabi campuses. Following this, different members of the team pursued their own research based on the results of the study. In Abu Dhabi the areas of particular interest were establishing the traditional cultural norms of marriage among Zayed University's female Emirati students, and discovering whether the students were experiencing any conflicts with them. It had been noticed with concern that the divorce rate in the United Arab Emirates and other Gulf countries was escalating and the question to be answered was whether exposure to western style higher education could be contributing to the breakdown of marriages. It was decided that focus groups would be an excellent source of qualitative data.

Focus groups combine a number of techniques used in ethnographic interviews and other social research methodologies. Ethnographers often study cultures and sub-cultures by interviewing one or more informants representative of the target population; focus groups on the other hand allow the researcher some access to the 'inner world' of a larger sample of informants, and greatly facilitate understanding of a culture, its underlying assumptions and the way its members interpret the world.

In participant observation the researcher learns about the values and beliefs of the group being studied by joining them. The researcher is 'undercover' and this can create ethical problems (Homan, 1991).

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However, with focus groups the members know exactly why there are there and have agreed to be part of a research process. They also expect the active participation of the researcher.

Focus groups can be very useful if the researcher is trying to discover the degree of consensus on a particular issue. They can also give insight into the attitudes, feelings and beliefs of the participants on a specific topic. The relatively intimate and social ambience of the well set-up group allows for personal disclosures and opinions which might otherwise be very difficult for an outsider to elicit. They are a very good way of exploring in depth and validating data collected anecdotally or from surveys or questionnaires. They are useful for confirming or negating assumptions or for forming the basis of new research (Gibbs, 1997).

Profile of a focus group

Ideally a focus group should comprise 6-10 participants, a researcher/moderator and a research assistant. The recorded sessions are transcribed at a later date. One practical consideration to keep in mind when determining the size of the group is that transcribers find more than six participants very difficult to track accurately. Moreover, the larger the group the greater are the chances of more than one person speaking at the same time, thus creating more problems for the transcribers. In addition the larger the number of participants the more difficult it is to ensure that each member contributes.

The composition of the focus group is an important issue. Usually if a group is too heterogeneous in terms of age, class, gender or nationality, the contributions of the members may be adversely affected. Participants may feel intimidated, or inhibited about disclosing their true opinions, others may be influenced by irrational prejudices, the fear of ridicule, or hostility; they may feel a pressure to conform and agree with the opinions of dominant members. On the other hand, if the group is too homogenous differences of opinion may not be expressed freely and it is possible that a dominant speaker could produce a virtual monologue (Boeree, 1998). The moderator must be aware of the symptoms of 'Groupthink' and must be vigilant in identifying and counteracting them. As long ago as the 1950's Asch (1951) identified the social pressure exerted by groups on individuals in his study on conformity. The moderator has to be careful not to be deceived by an illusion of unanimity when members who may have dissenting views practice self-censorship and withhold them: 'silence gives consent' is a dangerous maxim for guiding a focus group moderator. The focus groups within a university will probably be fairly homogenous, but the focus groups at Zayed University comprised unmarried students, engaged students, students in the 'milcha' (married but still living with her parents), and married students with and without children. This was an ideal sample which represented the ZU population of educated, young Emirati women, i.e. the exact target population for the research. We also tried to be sensitive to social differences between group participants – for example between more conservative and more liberal students.

The role of the text

Since the topic of the research was so highly personal and potentially intrusive it was thought that direct questioning would not be the most productive way to elicit reliable and honest responses. A diffusing and distancing device which would allow students to give information about the usual procedures for selecting marriage partners was needed.

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A short story by a local Dubai based Emirati writer was chosen as a stimulus. The version used was a translation by Jack Biggs of Mohammed Al Murr's 'In the Museum' (Al Murr, 1994). Al Murr, unlike many post-colonial authors, is not writing to explain, justify or criticize his culture to the Western world: he is writing for Gulf Arabs and giving his readers his own view of the social and cultural reality he observes around him. It is highly recommended that a text originally written in the participants mother-tongue should be used, as the author will share the same cognitive and cultural map as the group. Alternatively a newspaper or magazine article translated from the local vernacular could be used.

The advantage of using a piece of fiction written from within the culture is that the moderator can ask for clarification or information at crucial points in the narrative which are puzzling to the outsider but are tacitly assumed by all members of the culture. The participants freely offered comments on the lives of the characters in the story and compared the fictional behaviour with cultural norms and frequently made the transition into discussing their own personal opinions quite un-self-consciously. The fictional framework provides distance because the characters are not real people whom they might know. The responses make it relatively easy for the researcher to identify when there is genuine consensus on a particular topic and when there is real diversity of opinion. This allows for the formation of new hypotheses which can then be tested in further focus groups.

We will refer to this type of focus group as a Text Based Semi -structured Focus Group (TBSFG). Copies of the book were made available and students were told the focus groups would concentrate on the penultimate story. The facilitator explained she would read key passages from the story and ask the students questions. It was emphasized that there were no 'right' answers they were the experts on their culture and she was interested in their responses.

The role of the researcher/moderator

The role of the moderator is extremely important (Greenbaum, 1997). Once the research topic has been selected the moderator must construct a small number of questions designed to provoke the maximum interaction between the participants and to elicit the maximum amount of meaningful disclosures. To help ensure the validity and reliability of the results the same questions should be asked in each group in the same order. Naturally, the discussions will vary, but if the questions have been well constructed significant patterns in the responses will be evident and answers will be replicated.

There is some disagreement about the advisability of the moderator being known to the participants. However, in a closed community such as Zayed University this can hardly be avoided and can be turned into an advantage. It is essential that the participants have confidence in the researcher if they are going to feel comfortable and uninhibited and this is very difficult to achieve with a total stranger; in the context in question here, it was very helpful that the researcher was female. Before attempting to run focus groups it is a good idea to take part in as many extracurricular activities as possible – a preliminary form of participant observation. In my context, attending local engagement parties and weddings is an excellent and highly enjoyable way to begin, as are escorting students on field trips or simply joining them for coffee on campus. These kinds of activities help to establish that elusive but vital ingredient 'rapport' and also to establish that the researcher has a genuine interest in the culture and that the research is not simply an academic exercise.

Shared experiences also help to establish a useful alliance between the moderator and the group against the 'culturally ignorant outsider'. If possible disabuse the group of any prejudices they may believe you

have as a Westerner which could affect their reactions and disclosures. There is an ethnographic tradition which emphasizes the cultural ignorance of the researcher as a productive starting point for learning about a culture. Assuming a 'tabula rasa' can be an advantage when trying to learn about people's values, motives, behaviour, and assumptions. However, some patterns of behaviour, and some tacit knowledge are so deeply embedded that they are rarely discussed and have to be inferred by the ethnographer. A moderator with some level of knowledge of the culture has advantages and can immediately ask for clarification and direction on aspects of the cultural map she knows the group uses. In the TBSFG this is when the device of the 'ignorant outsider' can be deployed. The researcher can establish a degree of complicity with the group and dissociate herself from accusations of cultural ignorance by asking for clarification for a hypothetical ignorant outsider/western (an example of this technique is given below) or by frankly admitting some of her own early misconceptions which are probably shared by most outsiders (Kitzinger, 1994).

The moderator's role is similar to that of both an interviewer and an observer, but differs in significant respects. The moderator has less control than an interviewer, since most of the interaction is between the group members and not between the researcher and individual members. However, in the modified TBSFG the moderator does have more control than in a traditional focus group, because she reads or indicates particular passages from a given text as well as asking pre-planned questions. Unlike the observer in ethnographic studies, the moderator has to be prepared to intervene at any time if the discussion is getting off track and needs to be brought back onto the main focus, or if any one individual is dominating, or to stimulate silent or reluctant members to contribute. This is all part of counteracting the effects of Groupthink as discussed earlier in this paper. The moderator has to have developed an expertise at what Rogers (1951) called 'reflection': that is, rephrasing a comment in the form of a question in order to ensure the speaker's meaning has been correctly understood. This does involve a lot of repetition and this technique must not be overused, or the moderator can sound like a poorly trained parrot!

The moderator must take care not to influence the nature of the comments by offering any personal opinions on them. Of course one of the most challenging aspects of moderating is being aware of one's own assumptions and being prepared to put them aside. In one focus group the moderator told the participants that she was surprised by three things the first time she went to an Emirati wedding; firstly that guests were not expected to bring gifts, secondly that all the guests were female, and lastly that the guests would be fortunate indeed if the bride appeared before 11.00 p.m. These are three features that are so fundamental to an Emirati wedding that the students would assume everyone knows them and it takes something like the 'ignorant outsider' device to elicit this sort of information.

The role of the research assistant

It is desirable to have a competent, reliable and discrete Research Assistant. A senior student at the university in this role can greatly assist the success of the sessions. The research assistant is crucial to the success of focus group research. In a bilingual culture it is very useful if the research assistant and/or the moderator are bilingual: occasionally a participant may wish to use her mother tongue in preference to the second language, particularly if the speaker feels embarrassment about some personal or revealing disclosure. The assistant who has the trust of the group can translate and verify she has captured the correct meaning during the session.

The research assistant takes care of the 'mechanics' i.e. inviting the participants, preparing the documentation (consent forms etc.), booking the venue, ordering refreshments, and most important of all, making sure the recording equipment does not malfunction.

The Research assistant who helped in this project is still a student at the University; she is an Emirati Arabic speaker as well as a fluent English speaker. As a member of the group's own culture she could act as co-moderator, interpreter, and translator if there was ever a failure of understanding in either language or meaning. She is very adept at using technology and thus freed up the moderator to concentrate on her own role.

Her status as a student yet so obviously working with a faculty member in equal, if not superior footing, reassured any students who may have had doubts about participating. Her active role also gave credibility to both the research process itself and to the moderator, allaying any suspicions that taking part in the focus group was not a legitimate but rather a laudable enterprise.

It is not essential to have a research assistant but it is very helpful because she can take care of the technical details and allow the researcher/moderator to concentrate on the discussion.

Establishing a comfortable ambience

The Arab world is famous for its hospitality, and McNamara (n.d.) suggests that in any context refreshments should be provided. Although this was difficult to implement in focus groups conducted in the one-hour common break between classes, it is a good idea to offer the participants on arrival some light refreshment: Arabic coffee, fruit juices, and Lebanese sweets would be acceptable suggestions. These are served to guests in every local household, so this gesture itself helps reinforce the idea that this is not a class.

Another familiar local custom is the rather elaborate greetings expected before any matters of substance are dealt with (a custom which frequently frustrates Western businessmen), so the girls need time to greet each other. During this stage of the session it is important that each participant is thanked for attending and giving up her time. This is a good opportunity to introduce the research assistant and invite them to sit together to begin. On several occasions there were observers – another faculty member, a National lady counsellor from a local school, and a visiting social worker from Canada, and these ladies were introduced (only one in any particular group). If there are observers they should be introduced and their presence explained, e.g: "they're very interested and have asked if they can come to the session". The group should be asked for its permission to include the visitor, and the observer should sit at a distance from the group, preferably where she cannot be seen. No-one objected to the observer's presence, and seemed to forget about them completely. However, if any of the participants does not feel comfortable then the observer could be asked to leave.

We found it useful to ask for the girls' assistance in some way, either by adjusting the furniture or the a/c or placing the microphone. We often experienced technical problems and the girls were quick to offer assistance. These little details help give the girls ownership of the session; once the group is settled and someone has helped test the recording equipment the session can really begin.

First of all the facilitator thanks the participants and repeats that their names and I.D. numbers will never be revealed , nor will they be identified in any way.

Next it is important to explain that the session is being recorded in order to make sure that there is an accurate record of exactly what was said – without the tape the facilitator could easily forget something or misinterpret what was said. At first some girls were a little apprehensive about the taping, but without exception they all forgot about it as soon as they became involved in the discussion.

Ways to promote discussion

The use of cultural questions based on the characters sometimes requires that the answer be supplemented by a *verification of meaning* question. For example, one pre-planned question was:

Do you think this was an arranged marriage?

This was intended to be an almost rhetorical question, eliciting the answer “of course” and leading on to other questions (see below). However, to our surprise the first group responded in the negative. Since there would seem to be only one other possibility the question was rephrased as:

So you think the young people chose each other?

but this possibility was immediately dismissed and the students began offering suggestions that either the bride or the groom or both were forced into the marriage by the families. This in turn stimulated anecdotes about friends or cousins etc, illustrating students’ readiness to offer personal anecdotes and to relate the fictional situations to real life ones. In subsequent groups the modified question was asked (“Was the marriage arranged by the young people themselves?”). Here then was the first interesting insight provided by the focus group: for our informants, the idea of marriage *automatically* carries with it the connotation of the families’ involvement; so they interpreted the question about an “arranged marriage” as asking whether there was something unusual about the marriage (quite the opposite of the moderator’s intention).

Culturally directed questions based on the text allow and encourage the giving of information and a productive diversity of responses in a safe way. For example:

Do young people usually meet one another for the first time on a wedding night, as they do in this story?

or

What reasons made the narrator’s family accept this groom?

These questions are easier for the participants to answer than direct personal ones such as:

Do you expect to meet your husband for the first time on your wedding night?

or

What characteristics will your family look for in a groom for you?

But almost always the participants move from the cultural into the personal domain as the discussion proceeds. The shift in emphasis is imperceptible to the participants because they are so engaged in the topic, often giving the impression that during this attempt to explain customs and norms to the outsider they were examining and discovering their own tacit assumptions for the first time.

The first question was always related to arrangement of marriages:

Do you think this marriage was arranged by the families?’

(or the reworded version, see above). The answer was always that the marriage would naturally be arranged by the family.

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The next question was:

Why do you think this?

They immediately started to offer different reasons, usually arriving at a consensus that the husband had been forced into the marriage.

Then they were asked more probing questions, such as

What would you do in this situation?

If they did not offer any answers the question was changed to

What do think she should do in this situation?

It is a good idea to vary the questions, using some cultural, some more personal, some requiring a simple 'yes' or 'no', and others needing more descriptive answers. Simple verification questions allow each girl to make a contribution. If they simply nod their heads they may need to be reminded that there is a tape so they need to speak. Once they have said something ("Yes, of course" or "No, Never") and heard their own voice, it is usually easier for them to make further contributions.

If one member says something non-controversial it is a good idea to go to each participant and say "Do You Agree?" or "Is it always like that?" so that each girl is contributing as soon as possible.

The moderator has to have a bank of questions, on which she can rely to refocus the group as sometimes the discussion becomes so animated and they go off at a tangent, while this is often fascinating she must be ready to bring the discussion back to the topic. So useful formulas include "What you are saying is so interesting it deserves a focus group all to itself but could I just ask you about.....?" In normal conversation this would be rude; but this is not normal conversation and the participants usually understand and come back to task.

The kinds of questions which work well are:

In the past is it true that... most people thought/ believed/ wanted/...-ed ...?

It is sometimes safer for them to talk about the past, even to disagree about it, than to answer in their own voice for today.

There are several ways that students can be invited to share their ideas, the following have been found useful in helping students to verify, clarify or elaborate on something;

I have heard... Is that so?

Other girls have told me that... Are they right?

Can you just explain why/ what...?

Some Westerners don't know... Can you just confirm that this is the case?

Some Westerners think... Is it true?

Since focus groups do, in fact, focus on a small group of issues the facilitator has to repeat questions many times, although they can be worded differently. It is important to maintain interest in the replies even if they are being voiced for the fifteenth time: there are always some additional snippets of information.

Points to consider

Outside a university population, recruitment of suitable participants can be very time-consuming and once the potential members have been located they may require incentives or rewards to participate. However, at Zayed University the groups were mostly self-selected and students volunteered to take part: no material incentives were required.

Arranging a convenient time and venue may also be problematic. A comfortable and private venue, such as a conference room, is ideal. It is important to ensure there are no interruptions, so a warning sign on the door is a good idea. There should be a central table and all the participants and the moderator should be able to see each other. A classroom can be adapted, but because of its connotations, is not the best venue.

Confidentiality is a very important issue; participants must feel certain that their individual identity will not be revealed. Consent Forms must be carefully prepared and signed before the session begins. As the sessions will be taped, to further ensure anonymity it is important that no-one uses names during the discussion.

The participants need to be informed that they are collaborators and not subjects; they have the absolute right to refuse to answer any questions and/or leave the session at any point without giving a reason.

The purpose of the focus group must be made clear to the participants, they must understand that the session is part of a research project and that their talk has a purpose and will be analyzed and the conclusions published.

In any group some members are more articulate than others and will take the initiative. Members who do not offer their comments must be encouraged to do so. After a dominant member has offered an opinion the moderator should invite each participant to indicate whether she agrees or not by suggesting they verbalize some phrase such as "I agree/disagree" or "Yes. That's right/not right". The fact of having once spoken often gives enough confidence to the shy members to volunteer comments as the discussion proceeds. The groups become so engaged in the discussion that they always forget about the tape-recorder and the observer.

One of the main advantages of using focus groups is that participants find the experience enjoyable. They feel valued as experts and their self esteem is boosted by the knowledge that their opinions and beliefs are being recorded and will later be published. They welcome the opportunity to have their views made known to the wider community and feel that this is a way to dispel some of the myths that outsiders have about Muslim women, and a way of making the customs of the U.A.E. better understood in the wider world. Although the groups are all recorded, the girls still feel that their identity is protected, because they have been assured that their names and I.D. numbers will never be used.

The role reversal of student/ teacher is a novel experience, and rewarding to both parties. The teacher/moderator is there to learn from the students/participants who are co-researchers not subjects. This also has positive psychological effects and stimulates and encourages the participants to share and explain their views, and feel part of the academic world of research and discovery.

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