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Online Focus Groups: Electronic Discussions for Research

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Abstract: As part of a dissertation research project, an online focus group was created in order to help determine questions and issues to be asked in depth interviews of distance learning students about their motives, barriers and enablers in their decision to enroll in adult distance learning courses. The focus group used asynchronous discussion through a listserve for approximately two and a half months, and identified several key issues that were explored in the depth interviews. An FAQ for Online Focus Groups is included.

Keywords: *distance education, qualitative research, focus groups, higher education, distance learning, community college, Electronic/online focus group*

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1. Introduction

For more than half a century, researchers have been using focus groups as a tool for qualitative research. In the social sciences, accounts of group interviews date back to the 1920s (MORGAN, 1997), but relatively little was published about focus group research from social science settings until more recent years. Much of the emphasis in qualitative research during the 20th century was on participant observation and individual interviews (BECKER & GREER, 1957). Business interests were largely responsible for moving focus group studies ahead during the last several decades as *market research* found a receptive audience (MORRISON, 1998). Market research is generally concerned with

providing clients with "insight into the question the client is interested in, be it a product, the response to a programme, or the presence of an attitude" (p.144). [1]

Traditionally, focus groups, regardless of purpose, have been conducted in a face to face situation. But today, electronic communication technologies have enabled researchers to utilize new approaches to this form of research. And, once again, business interests seem to be driving development and utilization of this form of study. This is evidenced by a growing number of web sites that seek out individuals who are willing to participate in an online focus group, as well as to offer marketing research services to clients over the Web. One example of this is *e-FocusGroups: Qualitative Market Research*, organized by David VAN NUYS (1999). This market research company conducts research in the San Francisco area, where it is based, elsewhere in the U.S., and internationally both online and face to face. However, the social sciences, humanities, health, and education are areas that are now beginning to use the Internet to facilitate qualitative research, especially focus groups that can be conducted online. [2]

The study that I conducted as part of a dissertation research project utilized an online focus group as part of the research. The procedures and findings from that research will be presented later in this document. The following section describes some background on focus groups as they have evolved over the past couple of decades. [3]

2. Background on Focus Groups

Focus groups occupy a middle ground in qualitative studies between two other long time tools of research: participant observation and in depth interviews (MORGAN, 1997). Focus groups have, for some time, been considered as group interviews, often utilizing a semi-structured approach to questioning and relying on the responses themselves to move the interview or conversation along. This opens up pathways to new topics during the discussion, where the researcher is free to probe and explore some of the responses made by the participant(s). [4]

In general, focus groups are usually used in one of three ways. MORGAN (1997) states that:

First, they are used as a *self contained* method in studies in which they serve as the principal source of data. Second, they are used as a *supplementary* source of data in studies that rely on some other primary method such as a survey. Third, they are used in *multimethod* studies that combine two or more means of gathering data in which no one primary method determines the use of the others. (p.2) [5]

In the dissertation research that I conducted, the focus group was one of a multimethod technique where the focus group results contributed to a questionnaire that was developed and used, as well as interview questions that were later posed to distance learning students. In this way, the online focus group did not stand alone, but contributed substantial data that contributed to the other two methodologies used in the study (REZABEK, 1999). [6]

3. Three Focus Group Scenarios

One scenario where a focus group might be used is where individuals are brought together to discuss common or similar experiences in order to better understand the phenomenon. For example, women who have all experienced domestic violence might be brought together to focus on their experiences or situations that led to the violent episodes, in order to identify some of the precursors to domestic violence. All of the participants have a common experience which becomes the focus of the study. [7]

For marketing inquiries, individuals, often with a common background, age, or demographic characteristic, are typically brought together in a room to respond to questions posed by a facilitator or leader. The responses to the questions help to reveal information or enlighten the researchers concerning the topics and questions presented. The fact that the focus group members may have similar demographic characteristics helps the researchers to focus on the responses, with a high degree of confidence that the responses from these individuals are generalizable to a larger population. The researchers may then launch a marketing campaign or determine product composition from the conclusions drawn from the responses made by the focus group members. That should result in fairly accurate conclusion applicable to a larger population having similar demographic characteristics. [8]

Focus groups also draw upon the experiences of experts in a given field in order to pull together thoughts and ideas from individuals that have a high level of knowledge in the field. In this way, a great deal of information and knowledge can surface within the discussion among these experts. Reactions, discussion, supporting and contrary points can all be brought to light, and added into the discussion. This "expert panel" is often used in forecasting the future and other concepts that require the involvement of knowledgeable individuals. This was the concept used in my research, as experts and practitioners were brought together electronically for the discussion about enrollment precursors for distance education students. [9]

In most situations where a focus group becomes a vehicle for the research, the individuals involved will usually be from a common geographic area. This minimizes the need for extensive travel by those involved in the focus group. But limiting the geography of the group also limits the range of individuals who can participate. This is especially true and problematic when so called experts are the participants. Thus, the ability to communicate electronically, becomes a great asset when geographic distances are considered. But this is only one element in the logistics of the electronic focus group. The next section will explore some rationale for this new type of research. [10]

4. Rationale for Using Electronic Focus Groups in Research

With the advent of the Internet, a new vehicle for research has emerged. And, although the Internet has evolved from the educational arena (as well as government), it has been business that has begun to exploit the Internet for "e-commerce" (electronic commerce) as well as market research. [11]

It is not surprising to see numerous companies using the Internet to conduct their market research for product design, market identification, and to evaluate promotional strategies. Individuals from a large or small geographic area can be selected, demographic characteristics can be controlled—assuming that the information provided by the individual participants is accurate—and market research participants readily volunteer by completing forms at a web site (equalitativeresearch.com, 1999), which simplifies the recruiting phase of the research. [12]

Electronic focus groups can be conducted in one of two ways, *synchronously* or *asynchronously*. Synchronous sessions refer to sessions that are live. In other words, the participants take part at the same time as everyone else. They can use a chat room or online conferencing such as CU See Me. Asynchronous sessions typically use email, a listserve or mailing lists. The participants can read others' comments and contribute a comment themselves at any time, not necessarily when anyone else is participating (MURRAY, 1997). [13]

Holly EDMUNDS (1999) summarizes the advantages in using the Internet for market research by stating that such online focus groups: (a) cut costs; (b) have potential to reach a broad geographic scope; (c) provide access to hard to reach participants such as business travelers and professionals who have little time during normal hours to participate; and (d) provides for a convenient and a comfortable way of participating (p.23). [14]

EDMUNDS also states that doing the research online helps to speed up the process and provides for anonymity which can lead to greater openness. Although these latter points are well taken, the speed of the process could actually be delayed in comparison to face-to-face groups if the focus group is extended over a period of time in order to give everyone involved ample time to consider others' comments and respond. And, anonymity would hold true if the individual indeed felt a sense of anonymity during the focus group. However, there is much discussion concerning privacy and anonymity on the Internet, which is a growing concern among privacy rights activists (Wired News.com, 1999). [15]

5. Concerns about Online Focus Groups

To a large extent, the focus groups that are conducted for the purpose of market research are limited in that the participants must have access to the internet and be inclined to participate. Thus, the participants would not represent a true cross section of a group unless that group was a population of Internet users willing to participate in online research—and that is a limited group. EDMUNDS acknowledges this by stating that "unless you are specifically looking for Internet users, you may be disregarding a portion of your market by conducting groups in this manner" (p.27). [16]

Another concern mentioned by EDMUNDS (1999) is that facial expressions are impossible to see when conducting research online. This is even true, or at least very difficult, when a small video camera is used in a synchronous or live session because the quality of the image is still quite poor when transmitted over the Internet with its limited

bandwidth. She also agrees that "fewer spontaneous comments and less 'play' on a topic being discussed" may result from conducting the focus group on line (p.26). [17]

Another concern about online focus groups is raised by NEWHAGEN and RAFAELI (1996), whose interest primarily comes from the communication standpoint. They state that some qualities of the Internet have the potential of changing the dynamics of communication. This is also supported by this researcher, who found that some students have a fear of technology, be it microphones, seeing themselves on a television receiver, or computers, thus impacting their willingness to participate in a class or a discussion, as well as having a potential affect on what they say (REZABEK, 1999). [18]

6. The Distance Education Study

It is with an inkling of this knowledge that I launched my online focus group study in 1997 as part of my dissertation. I was not seeking a broad cross section of individuals, merely several experts in distance and adult education who happened to live in several different parts of the United States. My hope was that these experts, through discussion of several questions would be able to help me focus on the key issues and some questions that I could take forward to a group of college learners to probe their reasons for and other factors relating to their decision to enroll in distance learning courses in an Iowa community college. [19]

One fundamental question concerning this study was why conduct a qualitative study in the first place? Then, why conduct this part of the study through an electronic means instead of face to face? Certainly, some, if not all of the research questions that were posed, for example, what motives, what barriers, and what effect technology had on the student's decision to enroll, could have been addressed through an analysis of quantitative data. And a traditional style survey was used to collect demographic information as well as initial information about motive preferences. But the information gathered through quantitative research is inevitably impersonalized. Although it can offer means, ranges, and significance of relationships, quantitative research is less adequate, by itself, to offer deep understanding of life experiences and decisions or theory building. [20]

Donna MERTENS' (1998) presentation of qualitative research based on PATTON (1990) states that the nature of the research question should dictate the type of research that is conducted. She identifies types of research questions for which qualitative methods would be appropriate. Qualitative methodology is appropriate where:

(a) Detailed, in-depth information is needed about certain clients or programs; (b) The focus is on diversity among, idiosyncrasies of, and unique qualities exhibited by individuals; and (c) The intent is to understand the program theory—that is, the staff members' (and the participants') beliefs as to the nature of the problem they are addressing and how their actions will lead to desired outcomes.

(MERTENS, 1998, p.163) [21]

Information and data about motives, life experiences, and significant decision thought processes fall within the parameters of the three areas listed above. Such areas of inquiry may be said to lack desired depth when considered in purely quantitative terms, whereas qualitative techniques offer the opportunity to delve deeply into answers and self-histories in order to find information and relationships that might otherwise be missed by the

researcher. Another dimension of this study is the breadth of stories that were provided by the subjects, which offer a deeper understanding of the reasons and decision making process experienced by the distance students (see REZABEK, 1999). These stories also provide a thick description of the experiences and precursors of the students' decision to enroll. [22]

6.1. Background of the Study

As can be seen, the electronic focus group used in this study was one part of a larger study. This author conducted research as part of a dissertation on the motives, barriers, and enablers that distance learning students experienced when considering enrolling in adult distance classes at a large Midwest community college. Qualitative methodology was chosen because the research questions and the purpose of the study dealt more with the idiosyncratic decisions that students experience as they are drawn toward enrollment. The online focus group environment was chosen because of the need to involve individuals from several different academic levels and experience bases, and to seek input from a geographic area beyond the Midwest United States. This was accomplished by recruiting individuals who lived as far apart as Maine, Florida, and Nebraska. The travel time and expense of bringing these individuals together was cost prohibitive. Plus, the time gained from the incubation of ideas shared, I believe, benefited the general scope and depth of discussion. [23]

6.2 Methodologies

Mixed methodologies were used resulting in three phases of research, the first of which was the online focus group. The second phase was a questionnaire that was sent to a selective random sample of 210 distance learners. The third phase was the depth interviews conducted with 23 of those students. [24]

6.3 Purpose of the Focus Group

The role of the focus group was to formulate the key issues and questions that would be explored in the questionnaire and during depth interviews with the distance education students. [25]

6.4 Procedures Used

Focus group participation was voluntary. The primary means of communication initially was by telephone and email which alleviated some costs and time constraints. Those who expressed interest in participating in the focus group were sent more information about the procedures and topics to be discussed along with a copy of my dissertation proposal. Each of the members of the focus group were asked to sign an Informed Consent Form

and each was asked to participate with as much or as little input as they felt comfortable in providing. [26]

Members of the focus group were selected based on their experience and background in adult and distance education, or their experience in investigating motives of participation of adults in educational environments. These individuals also represented several different levels of education. That is, some of the members were from community colleges, others were from university environments, and one was from the Public Broadcasting Service's Adult Learning Service. But all of them had considerable experience in education either involving the education of adults in general, or education at a distance. [27]

Members of the electronic focus group included: David Bunting—Kirkwood Community College (Iowa), Dr. Sean Courtney—University of Nebraska at Lincoln, Jacques DuBois—Brevard Community College (Florida), Dr. Ellen Kabat—Eastern Iowa Community College District, Dr. Pamela MacBrayne—University of Maine, Wayne Prophet—University of Iowa, and Sylvia Scinta—Public Broadcasting Service (Virginia). [28]

The work of the focus group was predominantly conducted asynchronously by email and through an electronic listserv that was set up through the cooperation of the University of Northern Iowa, and was called DLMOTIVES. [29]

Background information about the study, the purpose of the focus group, and instructions about the procedures that were followed were explained to all members of the focus group in a DLMOTIVES FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions—[see Appendix](#)). The members of the focus group were first asked to consider a question, respond with their thoughts, feelings, experiences and suggestions, and then react to the responses given by the various members of the group. In this way, a discussion was generated, resulting in a rich environment of thought and idea formation. [30]

The focus group discussion commenced with an invitation to present some biographical information as an introduction of each person. Then, an initial question from this researcher was presented. The discussion and concept threads then evolved as the members of the focus group considered the question and responded with their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. They were then asked to also react to the responses given by the various members of the group. Subsequent questions were then posed to the group after everyone had had a chance to comment and react to the others' comments. [31]

6.5 Focus Group Questions

The questions discussed by the online focus group included the following:

- To begin the discussion let us consider the positive factors and incentives that often bring students to enroll in college classes, especially distance education. What are some of these factors? What motivations have been prominent? What do colleges do to draw students to enroll?
- At the community college/associate degree level, what potential deterrents would these students face in considering their enrolling in a course of study? Consider situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers. Do you agree with Cross and

Rubenson, who seem to feel that dispositional barriers have been the least studied deterrents for adult education and distance learners?

- In view of recent advances in communications technologies (such as the prevalence of computers, fiber optics, cell phones, etc.), what positive influences, and what negative influences might these technologies pose for students enrolling in distance education classes? Would certain students prefer a particular mode (telecourses, interactive television, online courses, etc.) of distance learning over others and why? [32]

6.6 Formulation of Interview Questions

Once the members of the focus group had thoroughly discussed the questions, interview topics and possible questions for students to answer were identified. These issues and questions fell into the following categories: motives of participation, perceived barriers to participation, encouragement factors, the impact of technology on the student's motivation, and the dependency/independency of time and place for learning. Questions that might be asked during the interviews were then formulated to reflect the discussion that evolved during the focus group phase of the study. [33]

7. Results of the Focus Group

As the focus group process was set into motion, a long series of events and activities began, the culmination of which would come many months later as the stories and findings of the distance learning students unfolded. The online focus group represented a foundation and part of a triangulation of support for the information that would eventually come from the interviews. On the one hand, the literature provided a solid basis of information with which to start the exploration of motives, on the other hand, the focus group gave direction and began to clarify certain elements and issues that had not emerged immediately from the literature. Later, the questionnaire would provide some initial information about the group of students that was being studied, including insight into their prior motives, their career interests, and their longevity in the distance learning program. [34]

As the discussions of the listserve began, it became apparent that the breadth of knowledge and experiences of these educators would provide a rich forum for the exchange of ideas and experiences. These ideas would result in a grounded basis of inquiry on which the interviews could be based. The questions primarily dealt with three issues that reflected the research questions under study, namely, (a) the motives and enablers that draw students to the distance education setting, (b) the barriers or deterrents that the students must overcome, and (c) the role, if any, and impact of technology in making that decision. The focus group discussion began on April 6, 1997 with an introductory statement from me, and concluded on June 26, 1997 with a final summary and thank you message from me. [35]

All references taken from the listserve discussion as presented below are cited as a personal communication, and are not included in the Reference List at the end of this paper. The text reference format follows the style recommended by the Web Extension to the American Psychological Association Style (WEAPAS) per their web site (LAND, 1998). [36]

Among the significant comments that were contributed during the discussions included the point that *convenience* was indeed a factor for many prospective college students. The requirement of juggling home, family, work, and school, makes the opportunity to take off campus courses with minimal driving time the only way that these students could attain a degree.

... the major motivation for individuals to enroll in distance education college courses is due to the "convenience" factor. This method of delivery most likely will save them travel time. This [distance learning] may also be the only feasible method in which they could attend the class or program. (E. Kabat, personal communication, DLMOTIVES Listserve, Apr 30, 1997) [37]

The matter of convenience is commonly offered as a simplified explanation of the success of distance learning, but the issue seems to be more complex than that.

The issue of convenience should not be underestimated . . . nor should it be confused with "laziness" or lack of sufficient motivation. "Convenience" is what these students need in order to juggle work, family and community responsibilities. Limited time, money and the need for childcare make distance learning a viable alternative. (P. MacBrayne, personal communication, DLMOTIVES Listserve, June 5, 1997) [38]

Although several members of the focus group had primarily worked with graduate students in distance programs rather than community college students, the thought was offered that some similarities may exist with motivation of associate degree students.

For these folks and at this level [graduate], the overwhelming motivation for enrollment in a program is career/personal advancement. They have had positive experiences with their previous education (it's been responsible for their having a job in the first place!), and they seek more education, because they understand that it will make them more worthy and valued in the workplace. . . . Overall, it readily appears that utilitarian self-interest drives their enrollment. (W. Prophet, personal communication, DLMOTIVES Listserve, May, 1, 1997) [39]

Several important concepts are described here: (a) the student's interest in a degree, in large part, is driving their enrollment, (b) job or career interests are strong motivators, and (c) their own self-interest is playing a roll in their decision. There may be other motivations as well.

I find that many students enroll because the course content itself is of particular interest to them or they thought enrolling in a college course would be fun. Others want to prove to themselves that they can successfully complete a college course. Some, with college degrees, enroll to take courses outside their field. Others want to earn a college degree . . . not necessarily because it will lead to a better job but because it is a lifelong goal that could not be pursued earlier. And, some younger students take courses at a distance prior to spending the money to go to a campus. (P. MacBrayne, personal communication, DLMOTIVES Listserve, June 5, 1997) [40]

Several members of the focus group felt that incentives and enablers for prospective college students are also important factors that contribute to a student's decision to enroll. Marketing is often most effective when it is by word of mouth. "Colleges can certainly get the word out via their regular communications, however I think word of mouth by actual users of this mode of delivery is the most effective technique" (E. Kabat, personal communication, DLMOTIVES Listserve, Apr 30, 1997). [41]

One individual felt that these "personal influences" were stronger than external incentives: "The point about word of mouth or 'personal influence' over more impersonal information sources has been borne out by the research. I and a colleague, Wayne Babchuk, have a paper on that in The International Journal of Lifelong Education" (S. Courtney, personal communication, DLMOTIVES Listserve, May 12, 1997). [42]

But external factors such as peer and spouse support, flexibility from their employer to attend classes, child care provisions, even toll free phone numbers sometime make a difference in the student deciding to and actually enrolling in the class. However, accommodations for part time students may be less forthcoming at colleges than for full time students.

Although the majority of students are interested in pursuing degrees and the majority of community college students are part-time 65-75% depending on your college (70% at BCC), most of our institution have only made minimal concession to the degree needs of part-time students. Many distance learners are those students who want to complete a degree (over 50%) and do so before they are too old to benefit from it. (J. Dubois, personal communication, DLMOTIVES Listserve, May, 8, 1997) [43]

Barriers to participation were seen by the focus group to be perhaps even more significant for distance learners than for on-campus students, because the time factor and often the transportation factor are reduced to some extent when the course is offered in a convenient, nearby location. But still other barriers become more significant, such as age and lack of self confidence, which also become deterrents to enrollment. It was suggested that perhaps the first barrier that must be overcome is self-doubt.

My hunch is that while all of these factors may seem to be jumbled up in a potential student's mind . . . that, in fact there is first the hurdle of "Do I want to do this?" and "Can I do this?", which must be gotten over before they are ready to think of convenience factors. (S. Courtney, personal communication, DLMOTIVES Listserve, May 12, 1997) [44]

Self-doubt and low self esteem represent dispositional barriers. Such similar barriers as lack of money, poor academic preparation, and lack of spouse support, as well as demands and limitations of their jobs may also discourage potential learners.

For many of these folks, the major obstacle to higher education may be the demands and pressures of their work roles and family lives. Regardless of how accessible an employer or an institution makes higher education to them, there is nonetheless the "day work" that still needs to be accomplished (employers can be infuriatingly contradictory about this) and the out-of-work time that belongs to not always wholly supportive spouses and children (if any). (W. Prophet, personal communication, DLMOTIVES Listserve, May 1, 1997) [45]

In similar research in Maine, MAC BRAYNE (1993) found 13 unique potential barriers to be significant to the Associate Degree student. Listing them in rank order, MAC BRAYNE commented on the list:

1. lack of money
2. lack of time
3. poor academic preparation
4. too far to travel
5. family responsibilities
6. lack of information
7. forgot how to study
8. low self-esteem

9. too old to learn
10. lack of interest
11. lack of support
12. no transportation
13. lack of childcare

This research was conducted with students who were enrolled, so they had overcome these barriers. We may find a very different picture if we were to survey those who have not enrolled. (P. MacBrayne, personal communication, DLMOTIVES Listserve, June 5, 1997) [46]

The concepts of Time Dependence/Independence and Place Dependence/Independence are other issues in distance learning that ultimately may influence whether or not a student enrolls and what form of distance learning is most appealing. A certain degree of self-discipline is essential for the success of the distance learner. But self-discipline becomes more important to the student's ultimate success as time and the location of the course become more independent. Less self-discipline tends to be needed when the course is more time and place dependent.

Many adult learners have developed a learning style which they recognize and gravitate to. Distance Learning (telecourses, online instruction) are forms of independent study, unlike two-way interactive instruction (extended learning—still time-dependent), and students who are motivated, are focused about goals, have the proper learning skills, are well-organized will select time-free and place-free learning modes for learning style preferences again because they know this is how they learn better, and how they can be their most productive (control schedule and work when they are at their best). Again, this speaks to convenience but explains why convenience is significant. (J. Dubois, personal communication, DLMOTIVES Listserve, May 8, 1997) [47]

The prevalence of women taking distance learning courses may well be an emerging fact of education as pointed out by one focus group member. "The number of women enrolled part-time [in college classes] almost tripled from 1.2 million to 3.6 million between 1970 and 1993." And, she added, "distance learning often constitutes an appealing alternative for working adults with career and family responsibilities" (S. Scinta, personal communication, DLMOTIVES Listserve, May 1, 1997). [48]

Technology itself that is used in many distance learning classrooms can be intimidating to some students. Even taking a telecourse at home does require that the student correctly uses the VCR. And still another issue in relation to technology that will be more significant as colleges begin to offer courses on the Web involves problems with access to an efficient Internet provider, especially in rural states. However, the issue also raises questions of accessibility for any of the technologies that are used in distance education.

It would seem important to explore accessibility of various technologies, comfort level with those technologies and comfort with the different pedagogies each entails. We have been moving to a mix of technologies but have had to move slowly in the area of Web-based courses for our particular circumstances. (P. MacBrayne, personal communication, DLMOTIVES Listserve, June 6, 1997) [49]

Another issue that was identified is that the age of distance learners may also be a factor in their comfort with the technology. If that is true, then the question becomes, is there anything that the college can do to alleviate that concern?

Adults may be much more uncertain and fearful initially to use these technologies. During the initial era of audio conferencing it was fear of using the microphone. . . . With interactive television it was fear of the microphone and being "on-camera". We need to help create a "comfort zone" with these new

technologies to overcome the negative influences. (D. Bunting, personal communication, DLMOTIVES Listserve, June 20, 1997) [50]

With the advances in technology and its increasing use in the daily lives of many Americans, the almost mystic aura of technology may eventually disappear. At greatest risk, in the mean time, may be the many adults from ages 30-60 who were past their formative years when the technological revolution began. High school and elementary students of today may be of less concern to educators as they are being exposed to computers, and other technologies in their schools at an early age. [51]

8. Summary of the Online Focus Group

The purpose of the online focus group was to identify important issues and questions that could be included in the interview questions posed to the distance learning students. There were a number of issues that emerged from the online discussion. [52]

The focus group identified convenience as an underlying motivating factor for enrolling in distance education, but convenience, *per se*, was seen as a broad concept that might be disguising additional factors. Degree seeking motivation, work or career advancement, are additional facets of these students' lives that make it necessary to seek or be attracted to a non-traditional approach to college courses. [53]

Marketing, more so by word of mouth than by overt college marketing campaigns, was seen as a potential and effective enabler. Personal influences, including spouse or family encouragement as well as flexibility from their employer to attend classes that would normally interfere with working hours, could also be important enablers. [54]

Barriers that were seen as significant by members of the focus group included lack of money, lack of time, lack of transportation, lack of family or peer support, poor academic preparation or readiness, and self-doubt. The quintessential advantage of distance learning may be that it counters the barriers of time and transportation which can deprive a person of the ability of traveling to a campus unless they live or move to the vicinity of a college or university campus. [55]

Technology itself is an integral part of almost all forms of distance learning. It is essential, then, for students to feel comfortable with technology in order to succeed in the class. Fear of technology, it was felt, could be more of a problem for individuals over age 30 than for individuals who are traditional age college students or even those in their 20s. [56]

Another aspect of distance learning is the independence of time and/or place that it can offer. Students who know their own learning style and motivational drive may be more interested in classes that are not only time independent but place independent as well. Conversely, less self-motivated students might tend to be more attracted and do better in a class that is more time and place dependent, such as live interactive television courses that meet regularly with the instructor present in the classroom, and offer more structure to the learning process. [57]

9. Conclusions and Reflections

The online focus group used in the dissertation research brought into play a myriad of issues concerning distance learning. Some of these issues, such as the convenience factor, degree seeking and career enhancement motives are well founded in the literature of participation. The concepts of time and place dependency and fear of technology is a relatively recent issue that were further explored in the interviews. Age and gender also appear to be issues of importance, especially in view of the predominance of women over men who are learning at a distance. [58]

Little discussion in the focus group centered on the previous educational experiences of students, but that may be because the perspective of educators who are involved with students who have enrolled is not the same as the perspective of students who have not enrolled because of previous lack of success in learning or some other reason. Another area that was mentioned only in passing is potential impact and influence that work and work time have on the college student. Yet, for the adults who must work, and perhaps are also responsible for children or a family, the extra demands of attending college classes cannot be easy. [59]

The online focus group represented an effort to capture knowledge from individual experts in the fields of distance and adult education. The results of the group discussion highlighted issues that were not necessarily evident in the literature, and resulted in questions raised in the depth interviews as well as the questionnaire that would not have been formulated had it not been for the contributions of the focus group members. [60]

The individuals who participated in the electronic focus group lived in widely dispersed parts of the U.S. from Nebraska to Maine to Florida, and could not have been brought together physically unless a large sum of money had been available for the travel and time necessary. Although it might have been possible to conduct this exercise using video conferencing equipment, the cost of doing that would have also been substantial. The latter techniques would have allowed a focus group to work in a synchronous or live manner, and would have been possible within a limited amount of time—a half day perhaps over videoconferencing. Two work days, however, would have been necessary, including travel time, if everyone would have been brought together into one location. But expenses are a real part of research, and often, the most economical method becomes the best method to employ. The online focus group experience provided a very economical method to conduct this part of the research, and resulted in vital findings that helped focus and clarify the rest of the study. [61]

The drawbacks to using an asynchronous focus group technique include lack of timeliness from beginning to the end of the process, sporadic participation and loss of participation at times by certain members of the group, and variable interaction among the participants. I will explain each of these in turn. [62]

Lack of timeliness: the focus group began in early April, and concluded in late June, 1997. During that two and a half month period, three questions were addressed by the focus group, in addition to the housekeeping and getting acquainted aspects at the beginning. A lot can happen in more than two months, and one can forget what comments were made in April by the time your discussion gets to June. Although the timeframe could have been

compressed, the discussion just didn't progress that rapidly in order to deal with each of the issues and questions in a shorter period of time. [63]

Sporadic participation/loss of participants: One of the reasons for the length of the discussions had to do with the sporadic participation that resulted when one member or another didn't participate for a week or two. Although that was allowed and understood, the loss of participants tended to slow the discussion down. Participants temporarily left the discussion because of such circumstances as attending conferences, final exam preparation and grading, semester break, etc. There is little time during the year when such activities will not affect individuals engaged in higher education. But the result was to prolong the online discussions somewhat. And, since the focus group was comprised of specific individuals, their input and reflection on the topic was important. [64]

In general discussion in newsgroups and listserves, even in market research, there are usually many people participating in the discussion, perhaps hundreds. The loss of a few people at a time tends not to interrupt the flow of information and comments, as it would with a focus group of just a few experts. [65]

10. Final Thoughts

Online focus groups will undoubtedly become a viable element of the qualitative researcher's tool box. Care must be taken in bringing together participants who are capable of comfortably participating in an electronic medium, that is, individuals who already have a comfort level with technology. In this way, individuals will be able to contribute and interact in the electronic focus group freely and clearly, resulting in their best contribution. Care must also be taken that the focus group is conducted and facilitated in a professional and efficient manner. Procedures must be made clear, and then followed by the facilitator and participants. Hopefully, this will result in a thorough discussion of the topic(s) by all involved and important information will be revealed that can benefit researchers in the future. [66]

With these limitations in mind, one must ask the question: is focus group research using the Internet a viable research tool? Perhaps time will tell, but I believe that as speeds of connection improve, access to the Internet becomes more universal, and bandwidth expands in order to allow for higher quality video imaging, the potential for conducting focus group interviews and discussions online will become a more effective tool for conducting qualitative research. In the meantime, researchers must be cautious about using the Internet as a vehicle of inquiry, and know its limitations, as well as its potential advantages. [67]

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Appendix

ELECTRONIC FOCUS GROUP FAQ

[The following was sent by email to the Focus Group members immediately following my opening housekeeping message, April 13, 1997].

List Serve DLMOTIVES FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions)

Listserves in general—

How do I subscribe to a listserve?

Subscribe to the listserve by sending a message to: mailserv@uni.edu
the message should include: sub DLMotives yourEmailname@host.domain
(note that *mailserv* has no e on the end)

How do I unsubscribe?

Unsubscribe by sending a message to: mailserv@uni.edu
the message should include: unsub DLMotives yourEmailname@host.domain

How do I tell who else is receiving the listserve?

For a list of subscribers, send a message to mailserv@uni.edu
the message should include: send/list DLMotives

What is the difference between a *listserve* and a *mailserve*?

These two terms refer to the same thing. UNI uses mailserv as its designation.

How do I post a message to the listserve?

Start as you would any email message in your browser or email package, but
address the message to: DLMotives@uni.edu

What if my message comes back with an error?

If error or undeliverable messages occur, check carefully to see that the addresses
and domain information is spelled correctly, and that the periods (dots) are in the
correct place, not commas. The most common error is misspelled words in the
address.

Does everyone receive every message from everyone?

Everyone who subscribes to the listserve will receive every message sent by a
subscriber to the listserve. A message from a non subscriber will be rejected by the
mailserve computer, and will not be posted.

How do I send a message to just one or a couple of people on the listserve?

To send a message to just a couple of the listserve subscribers, address the email
message to each individual, not the DLMotives group. You can send one message
to two or more people by separating their email addresses by a comma and space.
Use the list of subscribers if you do not have the person(s) email address.

DLMotives Listserve, specifically—

Can anyone join the DLMotives listserve?

For technical reasons (less conflicts and problems with email software) this listserve is "referred", i.e., all subscribers are submitted to me for approval. So, no phantom subscribers can just join the group on their own. It is possible, however, for someone to join at any time, if that is necessary.

Can anyone else view the DLMotives messages?

The only individuals who will receive the DLMotives messages will be those of you who subscribe to the listserve.

Should I quote a prior message that I am discussing?

For clarity it may be necessary to quote a passage from another message, but it will be best for the quotation to be as concise as possible to prevent messages from becoming overly large and cumbersome. A reference to whom you are quoting may also be helpful...Dave said..., or Pam mentioned..., etc.

Can I just use the Reply button to reply to a message? or do I have to create a new message addressed to the listserve?

The Reply button would automatically address your new message to the sender of the previous message, however, the Reply to All button should send your message to other list serve members as well. The original sender will get two copies of your reply.

Is there any limit on how long or how short the messages can be?

A word or a sentence may suffice, but I have also received long newsletters via listserve that are 20 pages when printed. It just takes a while to download the message.

Can I add attachments to my message?

I would encourage using the copy and paste method rather than adding attachments. There have been many messages sent that appear in mime format and garbled characters at the receive end. It is possible to save the email message and then unencode the message later as a viewable text file, but that is an extra step that can be time consuming.

Should I save all the messages?

The messages will remain in your inbox until you delete them. You can also save each message as a text file by using the File menu, and the Save or Save As command. Then give the message a title, and save it into a single folder or directory for future review.

How will we know when we are done with our task?

After we have addressed all of the questions and explored with each other all of the issues, we should end up with the information that I need to create a semi structured

interview schedule with the distance learning students that I will interview during the summer. That's my hope!

Roger Rezabek
Researcher
April 13, 1997

[<back>](#)