Getting past "shsssh":
Online focus groups as
empowering professional
development for teacher librarians

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This methodological review reports how online focus groups not only benefit the qualitative researcher but also provide professional growth among participants. The authors suggest that for school librarians, who often have limited opportunities for tailored professional development, focus groups can rapidly build a community of practice that transcends the original purpose of the researcher, enhancing knowledge and empowering new actions within schools following the model of Denzin (1997). By providing interaction, self-reflection, and professional sharing, the online focus group is a potentially powerful tool to include educators who share a professional culture but would not easily be reached by in-person techniques, as well as a method through which researchers can foster meaningful beneficial opportunities for professional learning and empowerment.

Introduction and Overview

In this methodological review, we report an example of how online focus groups not only benefit the qualitative researcher but also can provide an opportunity for professional growth among participants. In particular, the authors show that for school librarians, who often have limited opportunities for professional development that is specific to their disciplinary needs, focus groups can rapidly build a community of practice that transcends the original purpose of the researcher, enhancing knowledge and providing empowerment for new actions within schools following the model of Denzin (1997).

In addition to a brief history of focus groups, the paper will provide a review of issues in using online focus groups as a method in qualitative research. The background includes comparative studies (Eke & Comley, 1999; Kennedy, Kuh, & Carini, 2000; M. Williams & Robson, 2004) as well as examples of positive effects of focus group methodology when used in educational research (James, Rienzo, & Frazee, 1997; A. Williams & Katz, 2001).

Background

The National Science Foundation (NSF) has developed the National Science Digital Library (NSDL) (http://nsdl.org) to support all science education. The NSDL contains collections and services developed by universities, schools, professional organizations, government agencies, non-profit organizations, and corporations. When the NSDL opened its virtual doors in December 2002, it was the culmination of over a decade of research and collaboration among librarians, technologists, and educators to provide free, easily accessible, high quality learning resources and to conduct research on the use of new resources in learning.

Initially, the NSDL targeted teachers in its outreach efforts. Given the slow success of this approach, the NSDL expanded its education efforts to include school librarians, who often play the roles of staff developers within their schools. The NSDL offers school librarians interactive simulations, research articles, data sets, video, and still images. Tools to use these types of information independently and in the classroom are also part of the NSDL. Not only are these resources impossible to include in an traditional print-based school library collection, but also their expert sources and current creation dates can allow school libraries to facilitate the types of innovative learning that promote science literacy and support a variety of learning styles.

In many ways, science classrooms and school media centers are parallel universes struggling with their own reform issues and with documenting their own positive impacts. Yet, science reformers do not recognize the potential for school librarians to support their efforts nor do school media practitioners and researchers seem to be building relationships with science educators. In the absence of adequate data on classroom practices with science resources and their direct effects on teaching and student learning, school library content and services may not be fully utilized by its key audience.

Another reason for a lack of connection between science and school libraries may be reform efforts led by university faculty and researchers. University personnel often engage with teachers in school through two one of two means: research and professional development. In both of these instances, the university staff are usually directing the agenda, content, and pace of the experiences. And, each of these approaches did not necessarily represent engagement approaches that provide for inclusive, in-depth experience. A recent series of National Science Foundation grant projects that included professional development and research showed that there is another way to engage school personnel while still meeting data collection and professional learning objectives.

Through conscious design and recognition of the unique needs of school library school librarians and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) teachers, the university grant personnel integrated focus groups with workshops to create empowering, valuable experiences for participants. These focus groups generated the contexts and data included in this paper.

Literature Foundation

Researchers Robert Merton and Lazarfeld introduced focus groups, or group interviewing, into the social sciences in the early 1940s. At Columbia University, they

initially used group interviews to document people's reactions to wartime radio program. Though group interviewing was consistently used in market research from Merton and Lazerfeld's work forward, focus groups did not become a recognized approach until the late 1980s.

The domain-specific hesitancy towards focus groups stemmed, in part, from the positivistic, quantitative preference for research in social science. Qualitative methods mainly focused on data collection from individuals through interviews and surveys, but later, these methods were thought to pose problems of researcher influence and data collection limited by close-ended encounters. In contrast, focus groups allowed the researcher to interact with participants in natural settings and combinations. Because focus groups allow for spontaneous and dynamic interplay between participants, they gained popularity as a method to gather participants' perceptions while softening the researcher's influence on the data generation process.

Focus Groups in the NSDL

The goals of the research and evaluation projects in which the authors participated was to gain user perceptions about their information needs and the degree to which NSDL content and structure was able to meet those needs. Because focus groups are a preferred method of obtaining user feedback (Krueger & Casey, 2000), they were a natural method choice for some of the research conducted on the usability and use of the NSDL.

Focus Groups in Evaluation and Research

In the last ten years, researchers at secondary and post-secondary levels have relied on focus groups to achieve various objectives, including the development of learning tools that will appeal to students' interests and needs (James, Rienzo, & Frazee, 1997). The feelings, attitudes, and beliefs expressed by teachers in focus groups can prove to be an enlightening and productive process for the reseacher (Williams & Katz, 2001) as well as for the participants.

Focus groups are also a readily-deployed means of program evaluation and evidence-based practice. A recent study by Wilson-Matusky (2006) demonstrated the effectiveness of focus groups as a method of collecting stakholders' candid input on library services and programming. This method, the reseacher argued, was superior to interviews because they allow for the simultaneous representation and exchange of viewpoints.

Focus Groups as Professional Development

Professional development is often thought of as a process in which teachers engage to learn how best to adjust their teaching to the needs of their students. It is an evolving process of professional self-disclosure, reflection, and growth. The literature in this area of focus groups as a means of professional development is emerging as well and the researchers build upon inferences from related areas of study. It is the researchers' hope that this paper will contribute to its growth.

Methods

The research to be reported in the paper is part of a broader research program funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation under the National Science Digital Library (NSDL) program. The goals of the research and evaluation projects in which the authors participated was to gain user perceptions about their information needs and the degree to which NSDL content and structure was able to meet those needs. The studies have included science and mathematics teachers as well as school librarians, with an emphasis on practices at the middle school level.

Because focus groups are a preferred method of obtaining user feedback (Krueger & Casey, 2000), they were a natural data collection choice for some of the research conducted on the usability and use of the NSDL. This paper deals with a set of online focus groups conducted with middle school librarians in 2004 and 2005.

Moreover, the researchers chose to conduct the focus groups online, via email, due to participants' geographic locations. This method has been found to be highly valid and effective for collecting high quality data. Meho (2006) found that e-mail interviewing offers unprecedented opportunities for qualitative research, providing access to research participants quickly, conveniently, and accurately.

The sample includes four focus groups of middle school librarians who volunteered to participate in an asynchronous email exchange with the focus group moderator over two-week periods. The questions pertaining the various study topics relating to science and school libraries were sequenced to participants instead of released at once. The researchers are in the process of coding and condensing the emerging themes according to principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000).

While the intent of the study was to examine attitudes and practices related to science resources and school librarian/teacher collaboration, the discussion forum proved to be a setting in which participants were both comfortable in their interactions and willing to use the opportunity to share concerns and practices that were the basis for this paper. The results related to the initial research questions on school libraries and digital resources have been described in other reports. The themes reported here relate to the responses relating to learning and empowerment indicated through participants' interactions.

Data Analysis from Online Focus Groups

While focus groups are developed as a means for answering questions raised by the researcher, the spontaneous and interactive nature of the discussions led to new and unexpected results that were as much controlled by the participants' needs and desires as by the researcher's purposes. This proved to be the case in the online focus group results described here, as the participating school librarians not only reported on their own professional knowledge and activities but frequently added their unsolicited thoughts on the process of focus group participation and the learning that resulted from shared experience. The following provides an initial report of the data analysis that is still being more fully developed from the online transcripts.

School librarians and professional development

The theme of professional development (PD) was initially raised as the researcher requested information about PD activities. While the responses indicated that many of the participants were dissatisfied with their PD opportunities, the discussion also provided an opportunity to share best practices that were seen as providing an excellent opportunity for learning that had not been a specifically planned outcome.

Although one of the roles for the school librarian is to act as a staff developer, paradoxically, this person is often not included in district-wide professional development and school improvement initiatives. Many recent professional development programs have focused on helping teachers align their curricula to the demands of the No Child Left Behind "highly qualified" personnel requirement. Since school library school librarians are not considered educators who must be "highly qualified," they are often excluded from professional development experiences. As one focus group participant noted:

> [W]hen I approached [the principal about professional development]... his response was 'you don't count... it doesn't matter if you are highly qualified or not'…Is there a lobby group specifically for school librarians... or do we exist in the cracks and under the umbrella of 'teachers' that don't have to be qualified?

Yet, the demands of the changing curriculum environment both demand school-based support and professional learning for the school librarian. As a result, one way for them to obtain new knowledge is by connecting with other school library school librarians in less formal interactions than planned professional development. Thus, the school librarians readily responded to the potential for such learning in the online focus group environments while other topics are under discussion:

> The biggest challenge is keeping up with curriculum changes... just when I am "on top" of ...classification of animals, simple machines…it changes…When I inquired about participation on curriculum committee (so I could anticipate changes) I was discouraged by Media Director and then told NO by central office chairwoman. Forums like this [focus group] are informative and helpful.

Even if the school library focus group participants do not have an immediate or particular application for the topic of the focus group questions, they nonetheless welcome the desire to expand their professional networks and share ideas.

> This discussion sharing is fun! ... so far it looks like us librarians are on the same page… Thanks for the opportunity ... was informative... and good to know that I'm not 'the only one' with regards to several issues.

The resulting sense of empowerment leads to professional revitalization and growth:

> [T]his has nothing to do with one of [the researcher's] questions, but just a
> comment to say how interesting I have found all of your [participants']
> answers. As a result, I've gained new ideas and also motivation to go out and
> hit the hallways.

Even the placement of the focus group in the school year affects the professional energy of school library school librarians.

> I'm getting some great ideas and becoming more enthusiastic…again due to
> my participation in this focus group. Just what I needed at this time of year
> when I find my energy lagging.

Indeed, online focus groups function as vital professional development for this group of educators since to be effective, professional development must provide educators with a way to directly apply what they learn to their teaching (American Educational Research Association [AERA], 2005).

Discussion

Focus groups of school librarians not only offer researchers a chance to gather important data about the design and quality of educational resources like the NSDL, they also offer these oft-forgotten personnel opportunities for empowerment through gendered discussion, enhanced professional networks, and strategies to improve their effectiveness.

Online focus groups as a motivator for decreasing educator isolation

One of the results of the data analysis is the recognition that educators welcome the opportunity to interact with peers on subjects related to their knowledge and practices. Online focus groups offer reflective learning and communities of practice. As in other school settings, the structure of public schools often isolates teachers from each other and discourages informal learning among educators within schools. As one participant noted,

> My observation of the 'dynamics of teaching' is most feel secure within the
> confines of their own classroom. When teachers venture outside of this
> environment all kinds of things are open to criticism.

This is even more an issue with school librarians who are often unique within their sites, so that interaction with other school library professionals is not a regular occurrence. As a result, the participants found the focus group environment a welcome event for professional dialogue and in-depth reflection, resulting in both a sense of shared circumstances (I am not the only one like this) and the opportunity to learn of successful strategies for school library that had immediate relevance (I want to try that out here).

Online focus groups and empowerment for "School Library Women"

A second theme that emerged from the analysis is the issue of feminine voice. Because school librarianship is a predominantly female occupation, focus groups can give school librarians as women an opportunity to discuss their professional practice, thus giving

researchers a glimpse into their largely undocumented daily routine (Madriz, 2002). Moreover, when women have gathered to discuss their daily lives and are organized around a common or collective task, they are able to engage in the exchange of "narratives…filled with the cultural symbols, words, signs, and ideological representations that reflect…different dimensions of power and domination…" (Madriz, 2002, p. 369). This voice is further important in the relationship to school administrators who remain predominantly male and often fail to recognize the potential for curricular leadership in the school school librarian.

After participating in two focus groups of school library school librarians, one of all women and one of both women and men, one participant noted, "I see a pattern now- the women work together - who then bring me into the fold, and if it's a…guy teacher, [he doesn't] seek out to work with the women…" Her comment may underlie one of the most necessary functions of the focus group professional development experience: empowerment of the largely female school library community.

Melvil Dewey (creator of the Dewey Decimal System of library classification) noted when writing at the turn of the century about the ideal librarian, that "most of the men who will achieve this greatness will be women" (Garrision, p.174). His prediction may have turned out to be true since library work has historically women's work. The precise number of female school librarians is impossible to calculate since these data are either not collected or kept in a central location. While the American Library Association calculates that at least 15% of their membership is comprised of librarians who work in schools and that their female to male member ratio is 4:1, it is possible to conclude that women dominate the school library profession. And perhaps, the lack of firm data about school librarians further underlines the marginal status of this job despite Barron's (1995) claim that "no other subset of [the] profession owes so much to so many women as do those in school library media services" (p.49).

In the educational environment, school library school librarian may experience double subjugation due to be mainly women and to not being considered "highly qualified" instructional personnel. Focus groups can give school librarians as women an opportunity to discuss their professional practice, thus giving researchers a glimpse into their largely undocumented daily routine (Madriz, 2002).

Online focus groups as a qualitative method benefiting participants

Despite the arguments by critics that online focus groups are a lesser or more unreliable means of qualitative study, this research study suggests that the strengths and benefits of such methods more than balance the equation. There is little question that differences remain between face-to-face interactions and those online, but as the Internet increasingly is becoming a routine for educators in their professional capacity, it is no longer forbidding as a communications medium. While calls for more research to better understand the differences are understandable, the rapid shifts in technology and growth in usage make any such studies a moving target.

Online focus groups are both a reality that will not go away, and based on the responses by the participants in our study, a research method that meets the test of beneficence in the most positive ways. By providing a safe space for interaction including time for self-reflection and professional sharing, the online focus group shows potential as a powerful tool by qualitative researchers. It becomes possible to include educators who share a

professional culture but would not easily be reached by conventional in-person techniques, as well as a method in which researchers can give back a meaningful opportunity for professional learning and empowerment that directly benefits the participants.

Focus groups of school librarians not only offer researchers a chance to gather important data about the design and quality of educational resources like the NSDL, they also offer these oft-forgotten personnel opportunities for empowerment through gendered discussion, enhanced professional networks, an strategies to improve their effectiveness.

It is unlikely that the systemic and organizational factors that confound the relationships between teachers, administrators, and school library school librarians will be resolved; the classroom domain and curriculum initiatives may well continue to be seen as the provenance of the teacher, while the school librarian will continue to play a more subtle role. Yet, as educators, in order to contribute to the improvement of student learning, focus groups also act as a "consciousness-raising experience" (Madriz, 2002, p.369) allowing frank discussions of integration of the collective task of immediate workshop experience and the collective task of focus group discussion around larger organizational issues.

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Ellen S. Hoffman, Ed.D. is an inspiration…