

Students Cultivating Ideas: Utilizing Focus Groups in Curriculum

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Introduction

Primary research is a vital aspect of a graduate student's career and that of the agricultural communications industry. Instructors are becoming more adaptive to the changing roles of graduate students throughout the educational process and are finding innovative ways to help teach primary research in curriculum. According to Murphy and Terry (1998), technology was predicted to increase access to information and helped provide "teaching aids to ... meet the needs of the diverse learning styles of students" (p. 31).

Agricultural communications students have been found to be innovative with their thinking but lack critical thinking skills to better class work and research design, (Bisdorf-Rhoades, Ricketts, Irani, Lundy and Telg, 2005). Through incorporating primary research within classrooms, educators would be working toward fulfilling the need to encourage and facilitate critical thinking in order to better prepare students for the workplace (Murphey, Rutherford, Doerfert, Edgar, L., Edgar, D., 2013).

Many agricultural communications research designs rely on the use of qualitative research methods such as focus groups and in person interviews. The use of focus groups can be implemented in a controlled setting in which graduate students can work together to coordinate the study for class with the help of the instructor and educator. Using the cognitive load theory, students will be able to building upon learning without overwhelming the cognitive resources (Cook, 2016).

How it Works

The students in a graduate level, advanced video production course were tasked with putting together a focus group. The point of this focus group was to determine which graphics package (full screen, opening graphic, and name key templates) to be used in each student's video so the branding message would remain consistent in each video produced for the class. For the Spring 2016 semester, all students produced videos for an area agritourism business. The students designed a focus group to select the graphics package that would be used by all students.

A time was scheduled during class to collaborate and design a focus group a month in advance. Each graduate student was assigned a specific position regarding to the focus group plan. The roles included one note taker, who was also the liaison between the professor and the students; one technology assistant who coordinated the collection of necessary recording materials and set up the room; one person to gather incentives to give to participants; a moderator; three observers; one student designed a one page handout to assist the participants in scoring the designs; and several recruiters for participants. The day of the focus group, all students gathered and assisted in the setup of the focus group and the tear down.

Each student was required to create their own graphics package for the class using an Adobe Creative design program. Once all of the graphics were completed and uploaded to a shared drive, a student volunteered to compile the images into a format that was easy for the focus group participants to observe. A total of 25 individual graphic packages were used for the study. The graphics packages were shown to the focus group one at a time. As each set of graphics

were displayed, participants first rated each on the handout, which included a Likert-type scale to express their level of agreement with each design's overall look. When that process was complete, the graduate students tabulated the results and the top three graphics packages were shown to the focus group participants a second time. The focus group participants vocalized their likes and dislikes about each of the top three graphics. Thorough notes were taken to review the packages as a class at a later time. All five of the focus group participants agreed upon their favorite design and made a few recommendations for improvement. The student that designed the favorite graphics package made edits, then placed the final version on a shared drive so that all students in the class could utilize it for their final video projects.

Results to Date/Implications

In general, students have responded very well to the implementation of focus group within the course thus far. Students especially liked going back and reflecting upon the statements expressed in the focus group and felt this brought a new understanding to their original designs.

One student noted, "I thoroughly enjoyed planning and implementing a focus group in a controlled setting. Not only did I acquire research experience, but also, I was given feedback regarding my design and so I could improve upon my original design." Some students viewed the focus group and evaluated actions and methods for improvement upon other focus groups within curriculum. Some students noted that questioning methods within the focus group were vague and repetitive, but overall, the distance and resident students found value in the experience.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

The process of learning how to create, plan, prepare, and implement a focus group is important as many of these students will be tasked with conducting research in their future careers. For many students, this was their first exposure to conducting a research study, as such, the students in the course asked for additional information such as resources needed, roles, and processes. From there, the students could add resources, assign jobs, and alter processes as necessary. The additional information could come in the form of a book or an instructor-created guide to ensure the students include all essential components of a focus group study. It is also important for future students to understand how important it is to have five to ten participants. This is important because there needs to be enough participants to have a good variety of opinions, but a low enough number for the moderator to keep the participants on track. Five to ten participants allowed for this crucial balance to exist in a focus group.

Costs/Resources Needed

There are minimal costs required when implementing the focus group within a class. The cost of the focus group would include refreshments and incentives for the participants. Other resources needed would be a video camera to capture the focus group, mics for the participants, a computer to display and visual items and to take notes, and a projector to assist in the visual display.

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