

Teaching and Learning Focus Group Facilitation: An Encounter with Experiential Learning in a Graduate Sociology Classroom

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Abstract:

This article presents an innovative pedagogical approach used to facilitate graduate students' experiential learning of a qualitative research method, namely focus groups. Practical experience of research methods subjects students to the complexity and ambiguity inherent to the world of research. This apprenticeship-inspired approach, which provides a valuable complement to traditional transmission model teaching, was used with three graduate classes in separate years. Students appreciated the active engagement in bridging theory and practice via the experiential learning exercise. By experiencing first-hand the challenges of facilitating focus groups, the students achieved new insights and learning in qualitative research.

Key Words:

Focus groups, experiential learning, active engagement, facilitation, apprenticeship.

Introduction

One of the fundamental teaching areas in both graduate and undergraduate social sciences programs is research methods. Mentoring students in the complexity of research is important to build students' research skills. Alternatives to the transmission model of teaching and learning in sociology have been actively sought and proposals for innovative pedagogical approaches now include drama and storytelling (Hardy, 1989; Storrs, 2009; Yamane, 2006). However, little has been offered in the way of new techniques for teaching research methods to the discipline's students, with the

exception of Roulston, deMarrais & Lewis' (2003) outline of the pedagogical approach to teaching interviewing and Chow et al.'s (2003) use of the principles of dialogue, participation, and experience in their course on focus groups in cross-cultural research. To the best of our knowledge, experiential approaches to teaching and learning of focus group facilitation for general application, the topic of this article, have not been documented to share with other educators.

Qualitative research methodologies encompass a range of philosophical and practical approaches. Teaching qualitative research techniques through experiential learning is congruent with the conceptualization of qualitative research as craft to be practiced together by a 'master' and an 'apprentice' (Breuer & Schreier, 2007). The roots of the experiential learning paradigm extend back to foundational education theorists such as Dewey, Freire, and Piaget. The approach emphasizes the whole person as learner and attends to behavioural, cognitive and affective aspects of learning. The iterative cycle of practice, reflection, and practice is inherent in experiential learning (Cheney, 2001) and essential to qualitative research. As Zajonc (2006) argues, learning takes place at the hand of reflection, when students extend their horizons in a way that honours the scientific tradition that is rooted in both reason and experience. Incorporating reflection broadens the experience and joins it to a new kind of reason. Experiential learning provides opportunities for building skills, competence, and capacity in the next generation of social science researchers (Ryser, Halseth & Thien, 2009). It has been explored in a few salient and relevant contexts. For instance, Harden et al. (2012) describe the outcomes associated with a mock peer review process for a grant proposal developed by graduate students. Faculty advisers (the "funders") issued a call for proposals to which students responded. The same group of students then completed a project. While the authors posit several benefits (e.g., time management across multiple research projects) to the process, they do not explicitly outline the benefits of the "real world" experience to the students from their perspectives.

In addition to providing a solid overview of experiential learning in relation to qualitative methods, DeLyser et al. (2013) include students' perspectives of the learning process. These authors draw upon experiential learning in qualitative methods courses in geography in support of their approach to teaching students about interviewing and coding. Course evaluations demonstrated that students valued the "hands-on" approach to teaching and learning, which provided them with "insider" research experience.

Likewise, one of this article's co-authors explored the acquisition and application of skills in visual research methods through a publication with graduate students (Schell et al, 2009). Learning by doing yielded a number of positive outcomes, including an appreciation for the various roles associated with research, as well as the opportunity to develop practical skills. These are but a few examples which show that experiential learning is a pedagogical approach that is particularly appropriate for teaching social scientific research methodology because it represents both the practical elements of research, while embodying the variability and uncertainty in the research process, giving due weight to reflexivity (Hopkinson & Hogg, 2004). Practice-based activities expose students to complexity and ambiguity inherent in the research world which may leave them better prepared to manage associated, multi-faceted processes independently.

This article begins by outlining the procedure used for an experiential learning activity to teach focus group facilitation to three graduate classes in separate years. This activity was designed to develop knowledge and skills directly related to course objectives. The paper contributes to the scholarship on teaching and learning in sociology by offering not only a detailed description of the processes used in a multi-class study of the experiential learning activity, but also an assessment of its learning outcomes. The growing emphasis on the assessment of learning outcomes in sociology marks the development of the discipline from the ‘innovation and implementation’ period of the mid-70s-to-mid-80s to the present-day ‘evidence-based research’ phase (Paino et al., 2012). The analysis of the paper is based on the students’ responses to the activity from the three classes. With a multiple assessment capture, we acknowledge the differing pedagogical contexts of separate classes taught by different instructors and in different years, however the core objective (to provide students with active practice at facilitating focus group discussions) and overall procedures (role-playing, student critiques and focus group facilitation) were the same. Further, the qualitative method of evaluation, which pays special attention to developing students’ capacities for self-reflection is very much congruent with the activity itself – a qualitative method of data collection.

Background – Focus Groups

Focus groups are increasingly recognized as a valuable data collection tool for qualitative research, particularly in situations where the group dynamic is thought to be paramount (Kitzinger, 1994, 1995; Parker & Tritter, 2006). Newer applications of focus groups include the use of photographs or other visual materials to prompt and support discussion. Some texts provide guidance for focus group facilitation, as well as discussions of the strengths and limitations of the method (Barbour, 2007; Barbour as cited in Bourgeault; Dingwall & DeVries, 2010). But as focus groups break from their history as a market research tool and become more widely accepted as a means of data collection in a variety of social science disciplines, new concerns and questions have arisen (Duggleby, 2005; Kitzinger, 1994; Wilkinson, 1998; Morgan, 2010). Most notable of these concerns is the complexity of the roles and responsibilities associated with effective focus group facilitation – a topic which may not be adequately addressed through assigned readings or lectures and may be more suited to the apprenticeship style of engagement previously mentioned.

New researchers may be intimidated about the prospect of focus group facilitation and uncertain about their ability to be effective facilitators. Reading manuals about the facilitation of focus groups provides researchers with some practical knowledge concerning participants’ differing levels of commitment to the process, but such manuals are limited in that they, obviously, cannot provide researchers with the chance to practise skills, such as tactfully interrupting a discussion that has wandered off topic, drawing out reticent participants, and bridging cultural differences within the participant groups (Kroll, Barbour & Harris, 2007).

Focus group facilitation often violates deeply ingrained social norms, related to interruptions and not prying too deeply into people’s lives. Overcoming these norms to effectively facilitate a focus group, in order to develop a level of comfort with this role,

necessitates practise. Many graduate students and emerging researchers have not had experiences with chairing meetings, organizing group events, and other activities that require skills that are comparable to focus group facilitation (Barbour, 2007). Barbour states that “the good moderator should...keep a weather eye open for distinctions, qualifications and tensions that have analytic promise” (Barbour, 2007, p. 80). However, how exactly this is to be done receives little attention.

Focus group facilitation requires being cognisant of the interpersonal dynamics and the unspoken. One must pay attention to body language which might signal discomfort or an urge to share some information while being attentive to the reaction of the participants to the various questions and consider how they might be re-phrased or re-emphasized in the event that participants are struggling or not responding. Time is also a concern. Researchers arrive with focus group guides and while the associated process is one of discovery, there are usually a required number of topics to be covered. Focus group facilitators are, therefore, being asked to be aware of many factors that may positively or negatively influence the outcome of the group discussion. Being able to effectively attend to the many and varied dimensions of a focus group is not something that can be learned merely from reading on the topic.

Developing focus group facilitation skills requires practise and observation, but to acquire such practice is difficult. Established researchers might be reluctant to let new researchers, particularly graduate students, be secondary facilitators because their inexperience could jeopardize the research project. While our philosophical commitment to experiential learning would have us teaching focus group facilitation through direct field experience as done by Collier and Morgan (2002), our university ethics board policies would have made this difficult. In addition, there is much to be learned from observation, and not only facilitation. To have an “audience” of students observing a focus group would be unethical and unfeasible. Consequently, we designed and implemented an experiential learning activity to be carried out in the classroom, to replicate as closely as possible the experiences students would have if they were conducted focus groups in the ‘real world’.

The focus group facilitation exercise was designed as part of three graduate courses in qualitative methods in sociology. The courses were taught separately by the authors in consecutive years in the same PhD program in sociology at a mid-size university. Both instructors are PhD-credentialed with active, nationally funded research programs and have received awards for their teaching or research. The students enrolled in the three classes were in their first year of a sociology graduate degree program. The gender split was approximately even. Several students in the third class were from mainland China – the result of an institutional agreement with the Chinese university granting their undergraduate sociology degree - with English proficiency meeting the university’s TOFEL-entrance requirement.

The classes were held once per week and were three hours in length. The courses began with a discussion of epistemology underpinning the various genres of qualitative research (e.g., phenomenology, ethnography). Each of these was discussed in terms of its conceptual foundations, but also with reference to specific examples of empirical work (e.g., phenomenology, Rehorick, 1986; ethnography, Ellis, 2002). The courses then moved from methodology to method by considering various techniques of data

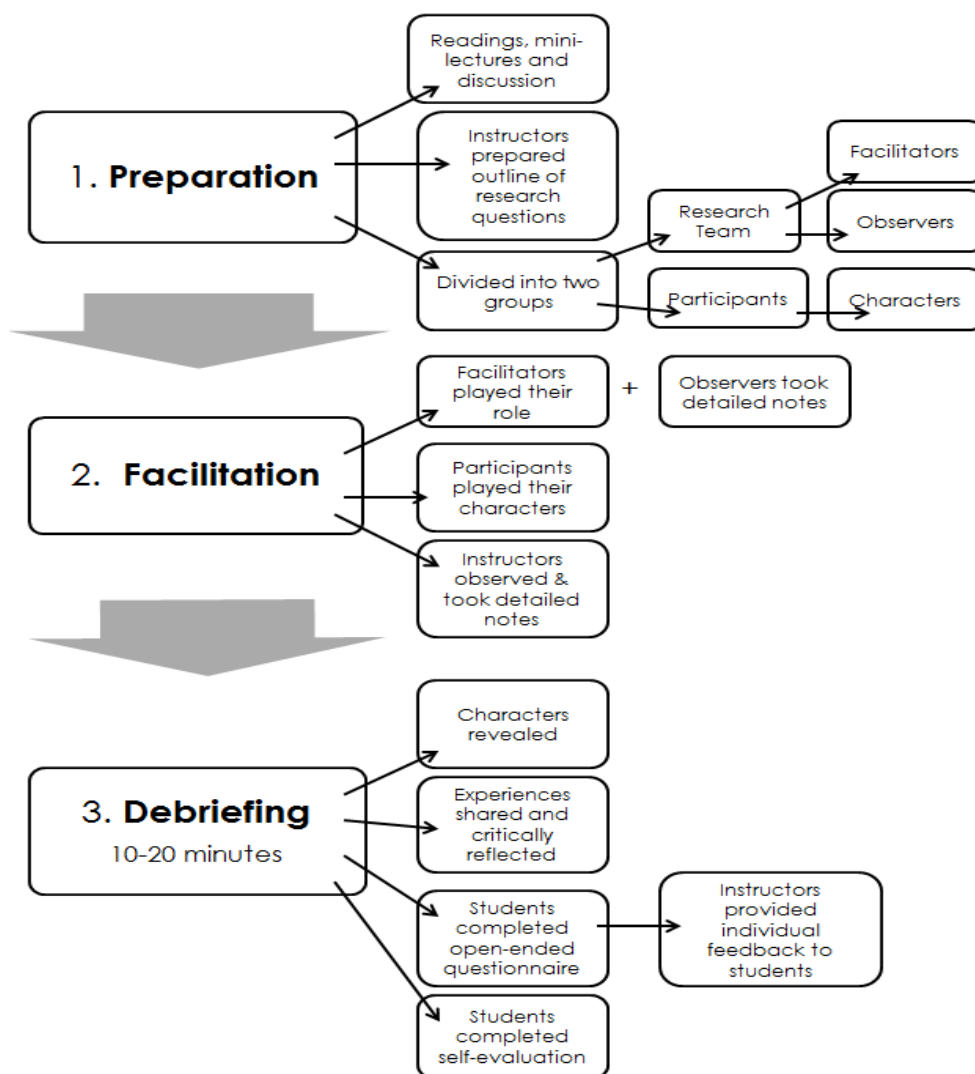
collection and analysis, including topics such as interviewing and qualitative data analysis software. Within the weeks devoted to discussion of data collection, students in the graduate course were asked to complete a series of several 'labs' which comprised a third of their final grades in the course. One of these labs was the focus group facilitation exercise discussed herein.

The paper's analysis is based on students' responses to the focus group lab collected from the three classes ($N_1=11$, $N_2=7$, $N_3=11$). One exception to the multiple-site data is a singular student who took two of the three classes ($(N_1+N_2+N_3)-1 = 28$). The data were stored and managed using Word software. To protect confidentiality, we adopted the following coding convention to specify respondents: a number indicating the class followed by a unique number indicated the particular student (e.g. C1P9 refers to the ninth participant in the first class). Analysis preceded using van Manen's (1990) approach to thematizing qualitative data. van Manen discusses many approaches to thematizing data; we used the "selective or highlighting approach" (van Manen, 1990, p. 94). This selective approach asks the researcher to consider: "Are there any phrases that stand out; Can we select some sentences or part-sentences that seem to be thematic of the experience that is being explored?" (van Manen, 1990, p. 94). We then took those selected sentences and phrases and organized them into themes. Saturation was reached when there were no further unique themes emerging from cross-comparisons and checks for parallelness and overlaps of themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Procedure of Focus Group Lab

There are three phases to the focus group lab: preparation, facilitation and debriefing. These are depicted in Figure 1 – *Focus Group Lab Phases* (below). In the preparation phase, students were provided with readings about focus groups. Both instructors also prepared a mini-lecture/discussion about focus group facilitation prior to the lab class. The mini-lectures covered the history of focus groups, their applications in market research, community development, organizational research, and other social scientific disciplines, and their features that distinguish them from other forms of data collection. The mini-lectures also included guidelines to address focus group processes (e.g., obtaining consent, use of recorders) and challenges (e.g., when/how to interrupt). Thus, the students had completed a 3 hour seminar and readings on focus groups (process and application) before completing the lab classes.

Figure 1 – Focus Group Lab Phases



At the beginning of the focus group lab classes, the students were divided into groups. Each of the students were to take a turn at being the 'research team'; being focus group 'participants'; or being 'active observers' who would provide a summary of what was done well and what could be improved upon by the research team. When acting as the research team, students prepared questions about assigned topics and then facilitated the discussion during the mock focus group. While the 'team' prepared questions outside of the classroom, the 'participants' were assigned roles and read over the information they were to share. The participants' roles reflected the challenges inherent to focus group facilitation. The post-focus group debriefing relied on the observers' notes, indicating the strengths of the facilitators and points for improvement.

The first instructor split her students in advance of the lab to match the personalities of students who were to co-facilitate the focus groups. For example, quieter students were paired together so that one student would not dominate the facilitation of the group. The other instructor split her students randomly into two groups by asking each student to draw without looking one of two types of candies from a cloth bag. Both

techniques of group assignment provided students with the opportunity to work with others whom they did not know well. In doing so, the procedure replicated the real-life conditions of research teams. Imitating real-life circumstances is a fundamental principle of experiential learning (Hopkinson & Hogg, 2004).

The focus group lab time was divided evenly to allow for each student to be part of a mock 'research team' formulating questions and conducting a mock focus group discussion, with time set aside for preparation and a short class de-briefing.

The instructors prepared an outline of a variety of research questions, some of which were based on their programs of research. The focus group discussions began with a topic that most students would be able to easily discuss: television and food practices. More esoteric topics of physicians' diagnostic and treatment of depression, disability after breast cancer, health-care policy making were reserved for the subsequent focus groups. In this way, the topics moved further away from the students' immediate experiences as the discussions progressed in order to allow for students to gain skills and experience as they observed or acted as participants in the initial groups.

Prior to each discussion, the students whom were designated as the researchers left the classroom to prepare questions for discussion. Approximately five to ten minutes were allotted for preparation. The researchers were provided with a handout which included a brief introduction to the topic. Some were simple and short; others more complicated and detailed, as the examples below illustrate:

1. Your topic is violence on TV. You want to know whether or not people think crime dramas have an impact on the behaviour of adolescents.
2. You are working with primary care physicians. Your topic is the diagnosis and treatment of depression.
3. You wish to learn about the experiences of students who work while attending university.
4. You want to understand the connection between people's food practices and their concerns for the environment: how they purchase, consume, and dispose of food waste
5. You want to understand what health board members consider to be an appropriate policy regarding the placement of seniors in nursing homes.

While the student co-facilitators were preparing their focus group guides, the instructor provided the remaining students with 'character cards.' These provided background information about the topic, as well as the student's role in the discussion. For the first mock focus group in each of the three classes, some of the students' cards simply asked them to 'play' themselves; others received character cards which urged them to assume some of the characteristics of more challenging participants (see Appendix A).

The assigned characteristics, which drew upon each of the instructors' individual programs of research, evolved into more complex roles, as the students gained expertise in facilitation over the course of the lab. In other words, the students were asked to assume more complex roles, with more information to share, and the

facilitation of the groups became more challenging as students gained experience in each of the three classes. For instance, the following character cards were assigned later in the lab and reflected composites (i.e., fictionalized) of physicians who were interviewed in a study about their experiences with diagnosing and treating depression. Two examples follow:

1. Female physician, rural area, graduated from medical school in 1992. Talks loudly and quickly and interrupts other participants frequently to agree with them (e.g., says yes, yeah I know, right). Sees about 1 patient per week who is newly diagnosed with depression, works 5 days per week. Uses a sociological, feminist perspective in understanding depression (i.e., pays attention to social circumstances). Very concerned about conservative religious groups and how they influence patients (e.g., patients are told they need to be more faithful).
2. Male, urban, graduated from medical school in 1980. Talks very slowly and quietly. Treats 30-40 people for depression per month, but unsure how many of his patients would be newly diagnosed. Believes counselling is very important, combined with anti-depressants. Assigns his patients homework (problem-solving tasks and journaling) to try to help them. Believes that patients he has known for a long time, or who have family members who have been depressed, are more likely to talk about depression with him.

A different set of character cards were drawn from the instructors' research on healthcare policy-making. The caricatures of health board members were developed from using known demographics of the existing health boards in the authors' province:

1. You are a 53-year-old man, living in a community within the region where many seniors live. You are a United Church Minister with parents currently living in their own home, in a nearby town, but their health is failing. The long-term care facility in the particular community where you live has a surplus of beds. **In the focus group:** You frown at the facilitator frequently because you think the board should not have agreed to participate in a focus group discussion about policies that they have not had a chance to discuss fully in private. This feels too much like 'airing the dirty laundry' of the board. So, although you have some ideas of what the board's policy should be regarding the placement of seniors in nursing homes, you are not going to let the facilitators know what those ideas are. You are polite in your refusal to participate fully and you explain very calmly why you are withholding your ideas.
2. You are a 62-year-old man. You are a lawyer and live in one of the region's small towns. You deal with the local townspeople's legal needs: drafting their wills, finalizing property purchases, etc. You just recently lost your wife to cancer. When she was undergoing treatment in the big city, you had to make many trips back and forth. The particular community where you live has no long-term care facility. You think that the media coverage of the placement of the 82-year-old woman in a nursing home 65 km away from her home is frightening some of the other board members unnecessarily. You think that this media frenzy should NOT pressure the board to design any kind of policy until it is ready. You are very concerned about the rising health care costs and so you are against the board

spending money on seniors (e.g., paying for those seniors to stay in their own homes while they wait for a local nursing home bed to open up). **In the focus group:** You say as little as possible and only speak when asked a direct question by one of the facilitators.

During the mock focus groups, instructors in both classes took measures to be as unobtrusive as possible. While the students facilitated the discussion, the instructors sat at the edge of the classroom taking detailed notes to capture dimensions of students' performance, including tone, timing, and content of interactions with mock participants. In particular, we looked for: preparation and format (focus group guide, awareness of method), facilitation (coherent, demonstration of leadership plus accessibility, ensured participation of each group member), interpersonal skills, utilization of a team-based approach, responses to participants (e.g., follow-up questions, validation), and generation of "on topic" discussion.

After each mock focus group, a 10 to 20 minute debrief session was held. Student-participants revealed their character cards. All had the opportunity to share their experiences and critically reflect on the process collectively. They shared what they had learned about the substantive topic being investigated (e.g., health care policy decision-making), the group dynamics in the focus group discussion, what was successful and what was not successful in the focus group, and what they could do differently when conducting another focus group. The cycle of preparation, facilitation, and debriefing was then repeated to give all students an opportunity to co-facilitate a focus group discussion in each of the three classes/years. Every student was therefore exposed to multiple focus groups, topics, 'characters' and approaches to facilitation, as well as debriefings about the strengths and weaknesses of multiple facilitators, including themselves.

The students recognized the importance of their roles and filled them in dramatic ways. Some assumed their characters in particularly robust ways. There was often laughter, seemingly related to some level of discomfort. Generally, students of both classes remained 'in character' and one reported that he found it much easier to play the role of a participant rather than to be a facilitator. Most, if not all of the students, participated actively in the class-wide debriefing.

At the end of the lab, students were asked to complete open-ended evaluations about their roles as facilitators with their 'research teams.' These evaluations allowed the students' a second opportunity to reflect on their efforts, rather than the initial class-based discussion. Written feedback was provided by the instructors based on the group evaluations in combination with the instructors' observation notes. The feedback covered the group's development of their discussion questions (e.g., coverage of research topic; variety of types of questions; appropriate sequencing of questions considered) and how they conducted their focus group (e.g., research topic and terms clearly conveyed to participants; evidence of responsiveness to participants; flexibility in delivery of questions).

Students in the third class had the final opportunity to critically reflect on their focus group experiences by completing self-evaluations following the lab. The students were encouraged to complete the self-evaluations as soon as possible after they left the lab

to better capture the immediacy of their experiences. In particular students' answers to the following questions: What did you learn personally from the lab? What was easy for you to do in the lab? Discuss your preparations for the class. What was challenging for you in the lab? What did you like about the lab? What didn't you like? What suggestions would you have for the next group of students as they learn about focus groups?

The above questions of the self-evaluation intentionally emphasize both process and outcomes. In line with Wiers-Jenssen, Stensaker and Grogard (2002), we hold that student satisfaction might not be valid indicators of learning outcomes. Consequently, the questions focus on the experience of doing the lab, the challenges it posed, and the outcomes in terms of their facilitation performance. We chose an open-ended line of questioning in part because of the dearth of objective measures of facilitation performance. However, the questions were also left open-ended to deliberately maximize students' engagement with the reflective process. Reflection has been identified as a key component in experiential learning which is necessary for students to extract knowledge from their experiences (Jordi, 2011) and is also a hallmark of qualitative research in general. The questions of the self-evaluation ask the students to interrogate their own assumptions and expectations related to their own learning and to reflect on very specific behaviours in their performance as facilitators (e.g., talking too much, too little, maintaining focus). The self-evaluation questions ask the students to reflexively consider their roles in the research process – a task essential for qualitative researchers.

The self-evaluations were done to maximize students' critical reflection. Interspersing the practical activities with opportunities to evaluate their experiences solidifies students' newly acquired understandings. Our analysis of the results from the self-evaluations confirms that self-reflection is indeed helpful if students are to create new knowledge from their practice. One student explicitly identified the value of the self-evaluations in his/her comments: "The in-class discussions & activities are planned interactive & engaging. Self evaluations were very helpful" (C1P7). The chance to reflect provided this student with the opportunity to recognize the importance of reflection.

Outcomes of Focus Group Lab

Students in the first two classes completed course evaluations. Students in the third class were given evaluations that specifically addressed the focus group lab. Analysis of the combination of all these evaluations revealed three themes: the value of experiential learning, challenges they discovered from the lab, and the new insights regarding focus group facilitation. The first refers to the process of the learning; the second and third relate to the substantive content of the lab. These three themes along with the suggestions for future focus group labs are discussed in the following sections.

Value of experiential learning

The students reported the practical nature of the learning was useful to "bridge theory and practice" (C1P11). Many referred to the lab as a 'hands-on' form of learning and found it "the best way to learn" (C2P2). One student spoke of the lab as "active rather than passive learning" and followed up with comparison to text-based forms of

learning: “the process of actually conducting a focus group is much more helpful than simply reading about how to conduct one” (C3P8). Another reported “I enjoyed learning research skills, rather than just talking about them” (C1P1). These assessments of the value of experiential learning support the existing literature (Chow et al., 2003). Because experiential learning combines ‘doing’ with ‘thinking’, the students can more readily imagine themselves conducting this form of data collection as future researchers. One student articulated the value of the practical nature of the learning by referring to his/her clear vision of how he/she as a researcher carrying out functions associated with research “the class awakened an aspect of my academic experience that allowed me to situate myself in a research methodology” (C2P3).

Difficulties with focus group facilitation

The students reported difficulty with a number of aspects of focus group facilitation, all of which have been highlighted in the literature on focus groups. First, they found it difficult to keep the discussion focused, at the same time providing the cues that participants are to speak freely and openly. An over-commanding facilitator presence, with an obvious agenda of sticking to the questions, can stultify rich conversation and interaction, and thereby compromise the data collection. Sensitivity to group relations is essential for effective facilitation and yet some control of the group dynamics is necessary.

Drawing out participants who were clearly reluctant or unwilling to answer the questions was another aspect of facilitation the students indicated they found challenging. As one student reflected “participants may be combative or they may be silent” (C3P11). Another aspect of facilitation students found difficulty with was that the various reactions from participants have to be analyzed in ‘real time’. As facilitators the students were required to react to the group dynamics as they posed questions. One commented “sustaining meaningful conversation with the participants proved to be much more difficult than I had anticipated” (C3P8). Another said of her experience in the role of facilitator, “I found it challenging to deal with people who did not answer my questions” (C3P7). Conversely, others reported difficulty with participants straying from the topic and providing responses that were not necessarily related to the research (C3P5, C3P9).

None of the students reported feeling the pressure of the limited time available for the group facilitation, even though the 20 minute limit per group discussion was far less than the recommended 1.5 hours (Packer-Muti, 2010). However, they did comment on the limited time for the facilitating group to develop the interview questions and it could well be that when they took up their roles as facilitators they had already adjusted to being time-pressured in general.

New insights and learning related to focus group facilitation

By directly experiencing focus group facilitation, the students learned features of the data collection technique that make it unique, yet pose challenges to any facilitator. The complexity of the task of focus group facilitation stems from the type of data being sought. Different from group interviews, in which facilitators seek answers from the individual group members, in focus groups, the facilitator seeks data on the group

interactions. Rather than seeking answers from the focus group participants, the facilitator is seeking the meanings and norms of the group that underlay the answers offered by group members (Parker & Tritter, 2006). The students came to recognize this added dimension of facilitation makes the process a dynamic one. One student expressed it quite succinctly, “I learned to pay attention not only to what every participant was saying, but also to their interactions, and they are affected by each other” (C3P10). Facilitation requires thinking on ‘one’s feet’ and even anticipating the analysis as the data are being generated (Barbour, 2005).

Not all students came to appreciate the full weight of how difficult it is for facilitators to manage the dynamic process of group interactions. One summed up their experience this way, “I felt comfortable because this method looked like a form of chatting” (C3P2). However, most students came to recognize the skills involved in responding in the moment to participants in order to best capitalize on the insights the group offers is a very difficult skill to acquire. Mastering the role of facilitation by moderating the group discussion between participants, not between her/himself and the participants, takes a good deal of practice (Parker & Tritter, 2006). Also required for effective focus group data collection is a good deal of planning and coordination. Only one student’s comments reflected this understanding: “I learned that preparation for a focus group is crucial. Focus groups are not something that simply happen, rather they are carefully planned and constructed” (C3P8).

Suggestions for future focus group labs

Because facilitation skills are so difficult to acquire, some students likely need more than one practice session in facilitation. Therefore, the first recommendation coming out of this study is for educators to plan on several facilitation practice sessions, or to encourage students to further develop their skills with their classmates independently, especially at the graduate level. Relatedly, the students suggested that in future focus group labs the research topics, and even the character cards, be distributed before the class to give more time for preparation (C3P2, C3P7).

Several other suggestions were made by our students, but the most common was to use research topics that were more closely related to students’ lives in future focus group labs. The rationale the students provided for their suggestion was that topics relevant to their lives would “make the discussion more natural” (C3P1) and would be easier for the students “to put forward arguments and act” (C3P5). None of the students provided particular examples of topics more relevant to them than those used in our classes, which were, with one exception, drawn from our own research interests. The exception was the topic of the connection between food practices and environmental concerns. Perhaps not surprisingly, another student recommending more relevant topics in the future offered the following remark on the topics that were used: “I appreciated the first topic of food practices very much since it is associated with our daily life” (C3P4).

Determining research topics and questions that are relevant to students requires an additional preparatory step for educators wishing to use the experiential focus group lab. Taking a page from the famous educator, Paulo Freire (1970), the first stage in the preparation could be accomplished by simply asking the students to generate individual

words and phrases that reflect their current concerns. Following the word-generation, the class would then collectively create several research topics and questions based on the themes emerging from the word list. Such an activity would have the additional benefits of providing practice for the students in developing research questions.

Two other suggestions came forward from the evaluations of two individual students. We mention them here for comprehensive coverage rather than as representative. The first was to eliminate the character cards and assigned roles in order to free students “to think of what they wish to say more than the role they are to play in the process” (C3P3). Another student, who expressed a fear of public speaking and “doing these focus groups definitely played on that fear”, suggested that the students should be told to concentrate on having fun while trying to be the best in their role that they possibly can be. (C3P11).

Conclusion

The acquisition of qualitative research skills is essential for contemporary sociologists, yet few have explored the potential of experiential learning in relation to focus group facilitation. Our approach is particularly timely, given that the perception remains that qualitative researchers simply “chat” with participants. Indeed, this perception was reflected in one of our student’s comments as shown. But, the comments provided on student evaluations also make clear that students came to appreciate the challenges posed by focus group facilitation through their participation in three different roles (as research team members/facilitators, participants, and critics) across several group discussions. These challenges and, more importantly, how to address them effectively, are somewhat difficult to convey in a transmission model of teaching and learning. While the students in each of our three classes did receive materials about focus groups (i.e., readings, lecture, class discussion), they felt that the actual practice of facilitation was beneficial. Although a transmission model is necessary to dissemination foundational information, the experiential learning activities described in this paper provides students with the opportunities to engage reflexively with both process and content -- the added value of this assignment and a key skill for contemporary researchers.

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Appendix A – Examples of Character Cards

1. Play overly agreeable and agree with everyone. Do not provide a great deal of information about your experiences, simply be agreeable.
2. Play disagreeable. Do not answer every other question – you can avoid answering every other question in whatever ways you wish.
3. Say as little as possible and only speak when asked a direct question by one of the facilitators.
4. Say as little as possible about the topics being addressed. Talk about many other subjects and try to dominate the conversation a few times.
5. You are a 17-year-old female. Play disagreeable. You don't know the answers to any questions and continually disrupt the discussion through loud sighs, rolling your eyes, fidgeting, etc.
6. You are an 18-year old female. You are very interested in the research project. Your comments are insightful and you are engaged and alert. You are the ideal focus group participant.