Using a Focus Group to Enhance Course Evaluation Inclusion and Feedback

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Abstract. To help instructors gain a better understanding of how students viewed and experienced their course, the novel use of a scenario-enhanced focus group was utilized at the end of a university course. This case study sought to identify an additional mechanism to use to directly obtain students' feedback that would allow everyone to participate and contribute to course improvement. General consensus on *end-of-course evaluations* questions the validity of solely relying on end-of-course student-provided teacher evaluations to fully evaluate an instructor/course. By strategically utilizing a focus group, properly conducted (scenario enhanced), greater contributions were obtained from all students regarding their lived course experience. Key procedural components: role-play (instructor pretended to be a consultant conducting the focus group as opposed to the course professor: allowed students to be more frank/direct), use of breakout sessions (initial questions posed and then students allowed to discuss among themselves before sharing with the rest of the class), direct questions and then open-ended questions (facilitated deeper understanding and all students to contribute via generalized discussion). Positive results of this case study indicate usefulness for other instructors.

Research Contribution: Provides key insights into the successful implementation of the novel use of a scenario-enhanced focus group to improve student inclusion and participation while obtaining useful and diverse student feedback on their perceptions of the course and instructor effectiveness. Specific instructions and suggestions for generalizability to other courses are also provided.

Keywords: evaluation · focus group · inclusion · participation

1 Introduction

This practical case study documents a concerted effort to employ a novel/innovative student centered active learning pedagogical approach through the use of a scenario-enhanced focus group while addressing the important issues of maximizing authentic student inclusion and participation along with obtaining usable, valid, and reliable student feedback on the course and instructor interaction experience. Student inclusion and class participation have been identified in numerous research studies as essential factors regarding equitable classroom environments and student achievement (Erasmus+ 2021; Glass et al. 2021; Goss et al. 2017; Romsa et al. 2019; Tharayil et al. 2018). In addition to impacting students' learning, the International Higher Education Teaching and

Learning Association's *Strategies for facilitating inclusive campuses in higher education, volume 17*, highlights this importance by stating that "an underlying key reason for inclusive campus climates with high-impact experiences is so that students feel valued and understood" (Romsa et al. 2019, p. 51). Yet simply allowing students an opportunity to provide feedback via a text-based end-of-course survey/critique has been shown to not fully elicit full participation or full validity/reliability when used as a sole method of understanding students' educational experiences or instructor/course effectiveness (Benton and Young 2018; Esarey and Valdes 2020).

The utilization of focus groups has been shown to provide valid and reliable results when properly implemented and applied across time in similar conditions (Chioncel et al. 2003; Dellafiora 2021). Its use within higher education for course/instructor feedback has some precedence (Rauf et al. 2014), but its specific application within a scenario as a direct means to elicit student participation and ensure that all student voices are heard (inclusion) is very minimal and practically non-existent until now.

2 Method

The implementation of the novel use of a scenario-enhanced focus group within a university class to gain all students' views and experiences within their course was done in a specific guided manner and conducted at the conclusion of two iterations of the course to observe for any differences across time.

A week before the last day of class, as well as days preceding the final class session, the instructor informed the students that they would get to experience a focus group by going through and actually being in a focus group (preparation phase). This was done as a way to help students be ready to discuss by having time to reflect, to learn about the additional professional communication skill of focus group interactions (done within a course titled *Professional Communication*), as well as to increase inclusion/participation and enhance general feedback about the course.

At the beginning of class, the instructor gave the usual welcome/greetings to the students, conducted the routine attendance procedure, and gave a quick introduction to what was going to happen in the class (a focus group) and specific aspects to look for (procedures, communication style, and types of engagement). Students were also allowed to ask questions before the learning session began.

The instructor then began by role-playing as a focus group specialist that was there to conduct a focus group on behalf of the course instructor:

"Hello everyone, I am a focus group specialist from Andersyan Consulting and I have been asked to conduct this focus group on behalf of your Professor for this class, *Professional Communication*. I've spoken with him and he is very excited to get the details of this focus group as soon as possible to improve his course for the next set of students. He asked me to thank you once again for your willingness to honestly participate." – The students smiled at this point, realizing that the professor was now assuming a different persona and was now a "third person view" coming from outside the classroom. To add realism, a simulated graphic was displayed with the fictitious *Andersyan Consulting* company name along with a made-up logo.

Students were then informed of the overall focus group process and that the session was going to be audio recorded for later analysis and to code for possible themes.

Additionally, each student was asked to sign an industry-standard Focus Group Consent form, to add further realism to the whole scenario and procedure.

The first question posed to the focus group was "What was your favorite assignment?" Although this is an opinion-based question, everyone was asked to break into smaller groups (groups of three or four) and discuss their thoughts and ideas as to their favorite assignments. This was done to make it easier for everyone to be included and discuss the topic in a smaller, more intimate group setting. Each small group was discreetly observed to monitor for full participation. After the groups had been given 3 to 5 minutes to discuss, they were all brought back together to share with the now larger group.

Once everyone was brought back to the main, larger group a discussion was held so that all teams could share what they came up with, "Team one, did you come to a consensus as a group on your favorite assignment? No, interesting, OK, what was your specific favorite assignment?" [student would express their particular favorite such as:]

"My favorite assignment was when we had to find a professional in the field that we wanted to go into and conduct a real face-to-face interview with them. I really liked that experience."

"And why was this assignment your favorite? What did you feel while going through it that made it your favorite?" "How did it help you learn the topic?" [Probing questions like these were used throughout the focus group in order to get all students to participate and to gain a deeper understanding as students would give their open-ended responses. These types of probing questions used were also somewhat based on questions typically posed in an end-of-course evaluation survey but done in a much more conversational style and designed to gain deeper insights.]

"Interesting, with a show of hands, who else had this as their favorite assignment?" [several students would raise their hands in agreement]

"I see, and why was it your favorite? [another student would be asked to give their open-ended response to gain a deeper understanding of students' thoughts, feelings, and views]

"Does anyone have anything else to say about this favorite assignment? [another student would be asked to share if they had additional feedback to present] This process was then repeated until all favorite assignments were identified, taking care to include all students to get diverse viewpoints/opinions.

The next question presented was "What was your least favorite assignment?" The same process of breaking the larger group into smaller groups was followed in order to maximize engagement from all students and ensure detailed course/instructor feedback. At times, some students would apologize for having a different viewpoint from the majority of the students. The focus group specialist would be quick to interject and state that this was actually "great" and that "multiple diverse viewpoints are very valuable in seeing differences of understanding and experiences."

Special care was taken to ensure that students stayed within the scenario of a third-party consultant conducting a professional focus group study. Towards the beginning, some students would sometimes forget and make a statement such as "Well Professor, my favorite assignment was…" Whenever this occurred the instructor (acting as the focus-group specialist) would simply state, "I'm sorry, I'm not your professor, I'm a focus group specialist from Andersyan Consulting." This would often be met with some

laughs from the class but would serve to bring the students back into the scenario. It was very important for the students to mindfully be within the scenario in order to more freely express themselves and provide the most truthful and detailed feedback possible.

After two rounds of questions using the small breakout sessions, students were asked a third question "What was your favorite instructional technique?" Students were shown an image listing all of the different instructional techniques (pedagogies) used by the instructor during the course. Some photos taken of the class, during different learning activities, were also shown to help remind the students of the many different instructional techniques used during the different class sessions. By this point, students had become comfortable and even enthusiastic about sharing their opinions so the small breakout sessions were no longer used. Probing questions were again used ("Why did you like this technique?" "How did it help you learn?") to go deeper into their responses and ascertain why they enjoyed a particular technique and how that helped them in their learning experience.

The process was repeated, but this time students were asked "What was your least favorite instructional technique?" Although some students started to answer by saying, "I loved all of them," -the focus group specialist would make a statement such as:

"I appreciate that you enjoyed all of them, but the Professor is trying to see which ones you enjoyed the most as well as which one's would be ranked lower. This is all to help improve the course for the next set of students."

Probing questions were then again used to help obtain deeper, multi-layered answers as to why they felt a certain way, how it affected their motivations, as well as how things could be modified in the future to help improve the assignment, the class instruction, and/or the course as a whole.

3   Findings and Discussion

Using a focus group in this way yielded multiple positive results which were repeated across a second course implementation. All students were able to easily and authentically participate more deeply than purely through an end-of-course text survey. Although students, in general, seemed hesitant to express themselves when asked negative questions "Which assignment did you like the least," or "What was your least favorite instructional technique," the softening of the question by expressing how the Professor really wanted to know their thoughts and opinions to help future students, really helped a lot of students relax and be able to more fully answer and share their true phenomenological experience. Additionally, no students were observed as being outright/completely reluctant to participate in the focus group event in general. Even those who were generally more introverted and less talkative in class fully participated due to the initial use of small breakout groups (which primed students to engage), a relaxed atmosphere (lowering of stress), and the use of the scenario (which helped to reduce anxiety when needing to express anything negative).

After the focus group event, one student directly commented that they greatly enjoyed the scenario and how the professor role-played as a different person (the focus group consultant) in that it made it easier to express how she actually (authentically) felt about the course, both the positives and things to improve. This student comment epitomized

what was noted in both implementations of this focus group, that using the scenario dynamic was key to its success. This correlates with higher education learning science research showing the effectiveness of using scenarios and role-play to help students better communicate and express themselves (Korochentseva et al. 2020; Rismi et al. 2020). Multiple students (across both implementations) agreed that the scenario and role-play helped them express more so than they would on a simple text survey form. One student even stated,

"This was more engaging and I felt like you wanted to really know my specific opinions."

Students did however have some prior exposure to the use of scenarios and role-playing in that it was one of many active, hands-on, pedagogies used throughout the course. This prior exposure could have helped them be that much more prepared for the final scenario-enhanced focus group. Korochentseva and fellow researchers' findings in analyzing the use and effectiveness of scenarios and role-playing stated that "…as a result of using simulation role play, students during one semester developed the ability to correctly, competently and clearly explain their thoughts and adequately perceive information from communication partners, make and analyze independent decisions…" (2020, p. 6).

All instructors should seriously consider the use of scenarios and role-playing in that its use has additionally been found to serve as a powerful change agent that can be used to help the instructor improve and to enhance the course experience and effectiveness (Chermack et al. 2020; Dellafiora 2021).

4   Conclusion

After highly favorable results in conducting this novel use of a focus group in two consecutive courses, this case study was formulated and presented in that multiple benefits were achieved (high levels of inclusion and engagement, along with a diversity of responses, together with detailed, deep-level usable feedback). Although further research is always warranted and encouraged, additional educational practitioners across a full spectrum of courses and topics should consider this student-centered active learning technique in that it allows for maximum participation and full inclusion of students resulting in greater feedback and a deeper understanding of students' perceptions of the course and instructor effectiveness. Suggested further research and development would be for different fields such as Data Science, Chemistry, Engineering, Computer Science, and other STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields, to try this technique and report on its effectiveness. Further application of this technique in Humanities fields would also provide additional validity.

The feedback provided through this method was much richer and deeper in that through the use of probing questions in the focus group, explanations as to why a student felt a certain way was obtained. This a major benefit over text-based end-of-course evaluation surveys that have the drawbacks of either only asking for Likert-scale responses or providing limited spaces for optional short essay responses. Many of these feedback forms are optional and are to be done on students' own time which results in a poor number of responses that are not inclusive and poorly represent the course phenomenology.

Although text-based end-of-course evaluation surveys do have the benefit of providing text that can be later analysed, using an audio recording device during the focus group will provide a captured audio file. This file can then be transcribed (manually or automatically) and used for further analysis. The active use of the scenario-enhanced focus group, done specifically as described, positively addressed the many shortcomings of the text-based technique.

Results of this practical case study indicate that the use of an engaging scenario-enhanced focus group, implemented as specifically described within this research, should be viewed as a useful, inexpensive, innovative pedagogical technique for obtaining usable deep-level feedback while fully and authentically including all students in the process.

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