

**Getting Everyone on the Same Page:
A Staff Focus Group Study for Library Website Redesign**

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Abstract

Purpose - Using staff focus groups in the redevelopment of a library website deploys their knowledge of user navigation issues and search strategies and addresses the unique needs of library staff. This article describes the process of planning, recruiting, and conducting staff focus groups and provides a discussion of lessons learned.

Methodology/approach - A committee of professionals and non-professionals from the University of Calgary Library conducted a series of five focus groups with library staff. The goals were to determine their content and service priorities for the redesigned library website, and also to ensure that staff were included in the redesign process.

Findings - This article makes recommendations for library staff focus group interviewing, including planning, formulating questions, recruitment, conducting sessions, and analysis and reporting.

Practical implications - Focus group interviews can be effectively conducted in-house, with careful planning and adherence to established guidelines. Focus groups are a very useful method for gathering staff input for website redesign or any other library planning project.

Originality/value - This article will be useful to librarians interested in assessing staff needs and priorities through focus group interviews. The article fills a void

in the library literature regarding the use of library staff as both focus group leaders and participants.

Keywords Focus groups, Staff focus groups, Library staff, Website redesign

Paper type Case study

Introduction

The University of Calgary is the second largest university in Alberta, Canada, teaching courses and supporting research across the major disciplines from the undergraduate to the post-doctorate level. The University's Library system serves a population of over 30,000 full and part-time students and faculty. By 2003, the exponential growth of electronic collections and a corresponding increase in the number of off-campus users resulted in the library's website reaching its content and functional capacity. To address these deficiencies, a Library Website Redesign Team was formed to begin the process of creating a more functional and user-friendly interface for library users and improving access to electronic collections.

The Redesign Team began usability testing with students and faculty in late 2003, where participants answered a series of questions about the library website and completed a series of related tasks. While data collected in this phase of the usability testing were critical to the eventual redesign of the library website, a priority of the Team was determining the content and service needs of library staff and ensuring that all staff were given an opportunity to provide input.

The Redesign Team determined that focus group interviews would be the most efficient way to gather responses from this group.

In this article, the authors, all of whom served on the Redesign Team, will discuss the process of conducting staff focus groups, from planning, question development and recruitment, through running the interview sessions, to data analysis and reporting. The team will also share some of the lessons learned in this process for the benefit of other libraries considering such projects. The authors hope that this article will help fill the void in the library literature regarding the use of staff focus groups and their potential value as a data-gathering tool for libraries.

Literature Review

A number of books and articles have been published on how libraries survey their users, but there remains a paucity of information about the use of focus groups to collect data from library staff. The available literature provided insights for the Redesign Team on how best to structure and run focus groups, and what kinds of data might be appropriately gathered. A recent annotated bibliography on library focus groups by Graham Walden greatly assisted the research process (Walden, 2006).

A focus group is basically a “group interview”, typically consisting of six to ten participants and is usually led by a moderator and one or two facilitator(s) or

recorder(s) who guide the participants through a series of open-ended questions on a specific topic of shared interest (Glitz, 1997, Walden, 2006a).

Classic works in the field include books written by Richard Krueger and Mary Anne Casey who have delineated all aspects of focus group work from planning to data analysis and interpretation (Krueger and Casey, 2000). David Morgan's *The Focus Group Kit* provides an overview of focus group methodology and how this methodology can be incorporated into social sciences research (Morgan, 2000). Other authors such as Mori Lou Higa-Moore describe the use of focus groups as a strategic planning tool and suggest that user-oriented institutions such as libraries need to consult their users in order to gather data about their services and collections (Higa-Moore *et. al.*, 2002). Lynn Connaway posits that appropriate areas for focus group interviews include the determination of community needs and assessment of new technologies, while other authors argue that focus groups are extremely effective for gathering opinions, beliefs and attitudes about a particular idea, product or service (Connaway *et. al.*, 1997, Crowley, *et. al.*, 2002 and Walden, 2006b). In addition to serving as a planning tool for libraries, Higa-Moore argues that few methods provide the quality and diversity of information than those produced by focus groups (Higa-Moore, 2002a).

Focus group methodology was applied to research questions in libraries and information science starting in the 1990's. The library literature includes an

influential article by Beryl Glitz that defined focus groups, outlined their uses and potential applications particularly “in the context of qualitative research in planning, implementing, and improving library services.”(Glitz, 1997a). Potential benefits of conducting focus groups have also been described in articles by Britt Fagerheim (Fagerheim, 2005) and Gwyneth Crowley (Crowley 2002a). Graham Walden argues that focus groups can also “provide an opportunity to probe answers, clarify responses and ask follow-up questions” (Walden, 2006c). In addition, costs are generally lower than other interviewing techniques and qualitative data regarding beliefs and attitudes can be readily produced. Britt Fagerheim discusses how focus groups can produce in-depth information with a skilled moderator able to probe and ask participants to elaborate or provide more detailed information on an issue or a topic that has been raised (Fagerheim, 2005a).

There is considerable debate in the literature surrounding the pros and cons of focus groups conducted in-house versus those conducted by professional moderators and recorders (Shoaf, 2003; Glitz, 1997b and Von Seggern and Young, 2003). However, the Redesign Team felt that there were a number of advantages of using internal resources to conduct the interviews. First, it would be a cost-effective method of soliciting staff input in a short period of time. Secondly, staff leading the interviews would possess the requisite contextual knowledge, including familiarity with the issues and terminology that would be discussed in a library focus group setting. The Team reasoned that

these advantages would outweigh any risks or inherent biases to data integrity and concerns about neutrality. Mori Lou Higa-Moore, in a related study, contends that “while we cannot know objectively if the presence of library staff members affected the focus group conversations, the participants appeared to speak openly about their needs and desires relating to library resources, services, and operations” (Higa-Moore, 2002b).

Methodology

a) Planning

After the usability testing with students and faculty, the staff focus group interviews project got underway. A team of three staff members was assembled, composed of two librarians and one support staff. The team chose one member to act as moderator; the two others would share duties observing and recording participants' comments during the sessions. The moderator had more experience than the others with reference and instruction, as well as some focus group experience, and was deemed the best candidate for the role. The recorders would conduct the analysis and all three would write the final report.

A meeting room in the library was chosen as the venue since it was an appropriate size and layout and convenient for most library staff. The meeting room holds up to twelve people comfortably and the furniture can be arranged in seminar style. One drawback was that it did not have computer or projection equipment. Sessions would be no more than one and a half hours long, with

about five to eight participants in each. A series of six sessions were booked in the meeting room, at various times of the day over a two-week period, to accommodate participants' and team members' schedules.

The sessions were to be recorded using an audio recorder. Team members tested the recorder and external microphone before the sessions to familiarize themselves with general operation as well as appropriate sound levels. The two-hour tapes would need to be turned over halfway through the sessions. Again for time and cost reasons, the team did not hire a professional transcriber for the audio tapes; recorders would perform the transcription.

As mentioned, the meeting room did not have a projector or computer, and the team discussed bringing the equipment in to display the live library webpage during the sessions. It was decided that the projector noise would interfere with the audio recording. Instead, library webpage screenshots were printed out for each participant. Also, the questions would be written on a flip chart, for participants' reference. Simple refreshments would be provided. Library administration created a small budget for audio-visual equipment rental and purchase of refreshments.

b) Formulating questions

The questions to be asked in the sessions required considerable discussion and research. Questions had to be designed to produce practical responses which

could be readily implemented, while at the same time allowing staff to provide input in a meaningful manner. The team initially drafted a series of eight questions. This list was revised and reduced to five after discussions about project objectives with library administration members on the Redesign Team. These objectives were primarily to determine the content and service priorities of staff, but also to get their interpretation of patrons' needs. The final questions were designed to elicit staff experiences using the library website, their perceptions of patron experiences, and key features and changes staff wanted for the new website. The sessions would open with an “ice-breaker” question, and then move on to the core questions, with a final “wrap-up” question. All questions were broad and open-ended in order to encourage discussion. See Appendix A for the list of questions.

c) Recruitment

Email was identified as the most readily used method of communication at the library. A message was sent out to all academic and support staff members using the staff email discussion list. The text of the message described the goals and context of the focus group project and asked for input from all staff members into the library website redesign process. The message also included brief details on how the sessions would be conducted. As dates and times had already been scheduled, staff were asked to provide a first and second choice of sessions. The text of the message is provided in Appendix B.

Response from staff members was prompt, due to the strong interest in the redesign project. A reminder email was sent out the following week, indicating that some spaces were still available. Staff who responded were slotted into their chosen session times; there was no attempt made to organize participants by unit or role. Focus group team members did some direct recruiting to ensure that most library units would be represented. Also as part of the recruiting process, library managers were asked to encourage their staff to attend the sessions. All scheduling, participant notification, and numerous other project tasks were efficiently carried out by a library administrative assistant.

d) Conducting the sessions

Staff interest was high and the focus group sessions began less than a week after the initial recruitment message was sent out. In total the focus group team held five sessions, each one and a half hours in length, with a total of thirty-one participants from fourteen library units and branches. Participant numbers ranged from five to eight per session. Each session had a random mix of support and academic staff, from different areas of the library. In some sessions staff, including the moderator and recorders, were in the same session as their supervisors.

To open the sessions, participants were invited to help themselves to refreshments, and then briefly introduce themselves. Next, the moderator went through a script which welcomed participants, reviewed the project goals,

discussed the audio recording, and stressed the confidentiality of all responses. Participants were asked to speak clearly and one at a time, for optimal audio recording. The moderator then began the discussion, leading participants through the questions, keeping the discussion on track, ensuring that all participants' views were heard, and occasionally asking probing questions. The moderator had to be careful to remain neutral yet make sure that all important issues were addressed in all sessions. The recorders took careful notes of participants' responses, observed, monitored the tape recorder, and occasionally added comments to the discussion. It was important to keep the atmosphere relaxed, professional, collegial, and respectful.

The recorders and moderator observed group dynamics during the focus group sessions. Most of those who attended the sessions were frequent users of the library webpages, motivated staff members who had a strong interest in changes to the library website. Most of the participants were involved with public reference service. Some participants came to the sessions with specific issues affecting their units. A few participants "griped" about various issues with the webpages, while others were hesitant to make critical comments. After the sessions concluded, participants were sent a follow-up email message of thanks and a copy of the final report.

e) Analysis and Reporting

The analysis and report writing was a time-consuming and difficult process for all

team members. The recorders began the data analysis by transcribing their notes from the sessions, then listening to the session tapes and filling in any information gaps. Due to the advance testing, there were no problems with the sound or quality of the audio recordings. It was very important that participants' responses were accurately reported, and also accurately represented the unique perspective of each staff member.

The next step in the analysis was to combine the responses made under each question from all five sessions, identify common themes, and assign a theme to all the comments. Eventually all the responses were organized by theme and sub-theme for each question. All responses were included, even if mentioned by only one participant. As it was important to relate the staff focus group findings with those of the previous usability testing, the usability testing report was used as a guide for themes and terminology.

Finally, a draft report was created, which provided project background, methodology, results and discussion. Some interesting direct quotations from the sessions were included. The results included responses organized in point form, by question and theme. Responses made in all five focus group sessions were classified as key findings. The final report can be found at the University's institutional repository: <http://dspace.ucalgary.ca/handle/1880/44198>

Lessons Learned

a) Planning

- Carefully review the literature covering focus group methodology and library case studies; these will provide ideas and guidelines for all aspects of the project.
- Establish clear objectives and goals for the focus group sessions and keep these in mind throughout the project.
- Team size and composition are important. The role of the moderator is crucial; this person must have good interpersonal and group leadership skills. Good analytical and writing skills are necessary for recording, data analysis, and report writing. The number of people needed for the focus group team is related to the number of sessions and amount of data collected. For our project, three people were appropriate both for the workload and for decision-making flexibility.

b) Recruitment

- Contacting potential focus group participants was easy using a group email message. As this may not work in all settings, use a communication method that works best for your organization.
- Keep your recruitment message clear and include the purpose so that participants know what they are signing up for. Offer flexible time slots to ensure that all staff have an opportunity to participate.

- Staff were very motivated to participate due to the importance of the library website redesign issue. Participation in focus groups depends on the level of interest in the topic.
- Library management support is crucial as it not only ensures that staff feel comfortable participating, but also helps create an environment that is conducive to candid discussion.
- Group size is important; interviews can be conducted with as few as four or as many as twelve individuals, with the ideal number somewhere in between. Our sessions worked well with five to eight participants.

c) Questions

- Questions should reflect the goals and objectives of the project. They should be designed to encourage maximum participation and to elicit unexpected responses.
- Five questions worked well for the length of our sessions (one and a half hours). Too many questions will make the discussion feel rushed and could inhibit an open and candid discussion.

d) Conducting the sessions

- Although sometimes difficult, the moderator and recorders must stay neutral and objective throughout the sessions. This includes refraining from making comments that may influence the discussion, and recording all responses impartially.

- The meeting room we used was not convenient for staff from all units.
Consider holding sessions to accommodate staff who work at off-site locations.
- Test audio-visual equipment in advance and have backup equipment in case of problems.
- Provide refreshments as a goodwill gesture. This helps break down barriers, gets people chatting, and encourages participation.

e) Analysis and Reporting

- We found the analysis and reporting stage more time-consuming and difficult than expected. This stage requires advance planning and use of qualitative analysis methodology.
- A professional transcription would have saved us some time; however, such a transcription would have lost the context of participants' statements.
Recorders were able to identify the source and context of participants' responses and analyze them accordingly.
- Accuracy in reporting is important for the maintenance of good staff relations.
- If focus groups are a follow-up to other surveys such as usability testing, use common terminology and themes in the reports.

Discussion

Our goal for the focus groups project was to elicit the content and service priorities of staff and also to provide an opportunity for staff input into the library

website redesign. In the course of our planning, we discovered that although there was research literature available on library focus groups, there was very little research on using library staff as focus group participants. We resolved to address this gap in the literature by providing insights from our project with this article. We hope that these insights will encourage other libraries to use this valuable data-gathering and planning tool.

Using a small team of library personnel to plan and conduct the focus groups was a cost-effective way to gain information from the staff in a comparatively short time. The process also benefited from the team members' knowledge of website issues, which assisted in eliciting and interpreting responses. Local jargon and library terminology were not the barrier they might have been to external facilitators, recorders, or transcribers. Team members found that most methodological aspects of the project were fairly straightforward. However, we gained valuable skills with planning, interviewing, and data analysis which will inform future library planning projects.

There were also intangible benefits of soliciting staff input for this project. Staff who participated in focus groups felt included in the change process and became more willing supporters of the new website. Opening the focus groups to all staff, regardless of work assignments, titles, hierarchy, or department, illustrated the library's commitment to a transparent change process. The process as a whole

benefited from having a mix of participants. Many staff worked together for the first time in this context, enhancing cross-department relations.

The library website was improved in several ways as a direct result of staff input through the focus groups. This input was given extra weight by the process and so had more impact than comments and questions of individuals addressed directly to the designers. Findings from the focus groups included both expected and unexpected responses.

The expected responses were similar to the faculty and student usability test findings and included:

- Terminology - should be simple and consistent throughout the website
- Navigation - intuitive pathways should be developed for academic purposes
- Searching - consistent location of a search box throughout the website is necessary as well as an integrated or broadcast search feature
- Design - layout should utilize color and graphics in a more efficient manner

The following unexpected responses were unique to the staff focus groups:

- Website maintenance - an efficient process for updating website content is needed; also responsibility should be distributed accordingly to ensure the website can be maintained in a timely fashion
- Authentication - process and display of the process should be simplified
- Customization - users should be able to personalize their library account

- Website organization - branch and unit webpages should be better integrated within the main library website
- Branding - a standard look for the main and branch webpages is necessary

While many comments underscored the findings of the earlier usability testing, others added completely new aspects to the content and functionality of the site. Librarians' concerns regarding updating of subject webpages led to the development of a new content management system for the site. Support staff concerns for more internal content led to the development of an intranet portal. As both wanted cohesive branding to be applied across the main, branch, and unit webpages, an external firm was hired to design a common website template. The improvements suggested by staff not only made the site more useful for them, they enhanced the website for all users.

Conclusion

We have provided insights into our staff focus group study for the website redesign project at the University of Calgary Library. Recognizing the value of library staff input was key for the Website Redesign Team, and focus groups were an effective tool for gathering this information. The focus groups findings helped determine the direction of the final website redesign and also had the intangible benefit of generating goodwill among library staff. Also, the focus group team gained valuable qualitative research experience which will be useful for future library planning projects. We are confident that focus group interviews

can be professionally conducted by library personnel and that library staff have much to contribute to this process.

Appendix A

Focus Group Questions

Goal

We would like to find out what your content and service priorities are for the new redesigned website.

Key Questions:

- Tell us about your experiences as users of the Library website.
- What are you hearing from end users about the Library webpages?
- What are the most important Library services and content that should be highlighted on the opening page? (i.e. links)
- What new or redesigned features would make your jobs easier?

Wrap-up Question:

- Is there anything else you'd like to mention about the website and the redesign project?

Appendix B

Recruitment Message

Library Webpages Redesign Project - Focus Groups

March 15, 2004

As most of you know, planning is underway to redesign the Library's website. A few months ago a website usability testing project was completed for a group of U of C students and faculty. We would also like to talk to Library staff about your content and service priorities on the redesigned website. Staff input is crucial for a successful redesign. Three library staff members will be conducting a series of focus groups in the next few weeks to gather input from Library staff.

We are looking for participants for the focus groups. We will start with six sessions, and schedule more if necessary. Each session will have 6 - 8 participants and will be held in MLB 432B. The sessions will consist of a series of questions about the website and will last about one and a half hours. The sessions will be audio taped; the tapes will be transcribed into a brief report which will help guide the website redesign. All responses are anonymous.

Dates and times are listed below. If you would like to participate in one of the groups, please email...

Please provide a first and second choice.

Dates/Times:

Monday, March 22: 1 - 2:30, 3 - 4:30

Thursday, March 25: 1 - 2:30, 3 - 4:30

Wednesday, March 31: 9 -10:30, 11 -12:30

Thank you for your participation.

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