

Focus groups – stimulating and rewarding co-operation between the library and its patrons

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Abstract: Academic libraries are undergoing massive change. New information resources and technological development as well as new needs among patrons require their active involvement in the development of library services. In order to guarantee a good quality of services a customer perspective is essential.

This paper demonstrates how focus group interviews were used to assess patrons' needs and opinions of present and future services at Åbo Akademi University Library. A qualitative method was deemed necessary to get a deeper understanding of patrons' underlying wishes and ideas. This paper also outlines the results gained and the actions taken in response to the results as well as suggests strategies for a continuous development of services based on the needs of customers.

Keywords: focus groups, academic libraries, students, researchers, library services, qualitative methods

1. Introduction

One big challenge for university libraries nowadays is to involve their patrons in the development of their services. A customer perspective is necessary in order to guarantee a good quality of services. It is also of great importance to assess the changing needs of the patrons, especially new generations of library users. As the methods for involving the patrons are many, it is of utmost importance that libraries share their experiences with one another.

Åbo Akademi University is an internationally acknowledged research university with twelve departments within three divisions (Division of Arts, Education and Theology, Division for Social Sciences and Division for Natural Sciences and Technology). The university has around 5500 undergraduate students, about 950 postgraduate students and over 1000 international students.

Åbo Akademi University Library is an academic library with over two million printed books and journals, and providing access to approximately 22.000 licensed e-journals and 300.000 e-books. The library serves students, researchers, teachers as well as the general public. The library comprises a Main Library and seven subject and campus libraries. The library offers direct service for its patrons as well as online services. The library offers students, researchers and staff training in information retrieval at various levels.

Åbo Akademi University Library has regularly been carrying out user surveys in order to establish how well the library meets the demands and wishes of its patrons. As the main part of these surveys have been conducted by quantitative methods, e.g. by questionnaires, the library decided to embark on a new way of assessing the needs of its patrons, namely by using the focus group method. The main incentive was to be able to listen more actively to our patrons. Furthermore, the library wanted to more strongly involve the patrons in the development of the library services.

Åbo Akademi University Library carried out two separate sets of focus group interviews. The first one, with students as the target group, was carried out in the autumn of 2011, and having been greatly impressed by the results of these, the library went ahead with a second one, with researchers as the target group, in the autumn of 2012.

2. Literature review

Focus group studies have become more common in libraries during the 1990s and the 21st century. Evidence of this can be found in the numerous articles written on this subject in library and information science journals since the 1990s. Beryl Glitz (1997) has written a detailed article about the use of the focus group technique in library research. Widdows, Hensler and Wyncott (1991) were very early describing the focus group interview as a method for assessing users' evaluation of library services. For more information about the focus group technique in general, Merton, Fiske and Kendall (1956) and Krueger (1988) have written adequate handbooks in this respect.

3. Methodology

The focus group method is a qualitative research method in which a group of people are asked about their opinions of and attitudes towards, for instance, a service. The method was developed mainly by sociologist Robert King Merton in the 1940s in the United States. The method has been popular within social sciences and has increasingly been used by libraries.

Main elements of a focus group interview are:

- A group of people (preferably 6-12 persons) discussing specific issues
- Interaction between the participants
- Presence of a moderator, a secretary and an observer

- Predefined questions as a basis for the discussion

The role of the moderator is challenging, as he/she needs to keep the discussion flowing, helps participants feel at ease and willing to contribute, asks the questions but is careful not to dominate the interview and stays neutral in all situations (Hernon and Altman, 2010). The secretary makes notes of the discussion and writes the summary. It is also possible to record the session but this is more time-consuming when analyzing the material and some people may not find the recording comfortable. The role of the observer is important, as he/she can concentrate on the dynamics of the interview, the participants' emotions and the overall atmosphere of the session.

The composition of the focus groups has been much debated. Even though there are seldom great possibilities of deciding the individual participants in each group (due to for instance problems finding a suitable time for all participants that you wish to gather in the same group), a certain amount of homogeneity among group members is desirable, while on the other hand some heterogeneity should also be sought (Wibeck, Abrandt Dahlgren and Öberg, 2007).

During a focus group interview participants discuss certain themes or questions, which are presented by the moderator for the session. The aim is to get as many opinions as possible on a given topic. It is important to remember, when planning the themes or questions, that questions should be open-ended and facilitate the ongoing discussion between all participants.

The main advantage of focus group interviews is the interaction between the participants. This can never be achieved by individual interviews or questionnaires. Other strengths of the method are receiving data more quickly and cheaply than by using one-on-one interviewing and providing opportunity to clarify responses and to ask follow-up questions. The relatively small number of participants in a focus group interview can be considered a disadvantage, as the possibility to generalize results is very limited. Other possible weaknesses are dominating moderators and quiet participants (Hernon and Altman, 2010). All in all a focus group interview is a "carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions in a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment" (Krueger, 1988).

4. Focus groups with students

4.1. Planning and implementing the interviews

Åbo Akademi University Library started planning for the focus group project in the spring of 2011 by the appointment of a project working group. The working group consisted of six librarians at the Åbo Akademi University Library.

Important issues to be decided on were:

- the target group
- the number of focus group interviews to be carried out

- the size and composition of the groups
- the venue for the interviews
- the recruitment process
- the questions/themes to be discussed

As students constitute the largest group of the library's patrons, it was decided to focus on them as a target group. It was deemed necessary to conduct at least two, preferably three, focus group interviews, in order to be able to make comparisons. A cafeteria, in the vicinity of the university, was considered to fulfil the criteria of a cosy, relaxing and nonthreatening environment. For the recruitment of participants it was decided to use all existing channels, i.e. e-mail to all students, invitation flyers in student restaurants and on library premises, information on the university's webpage and on the library's social media platforms (Facebook and the library's blog). Least but not last it was decided that altogether four of the librarians in the working group would participate at the interviews, three at each interview and by changing roles (moderator, secretary, observer) for each interview.

Preparing the questions for the interviews proved to be one of the most time-consuming tasks within the project. In the end it was decided to focus on the themes of how the students have acquired their search methods, where they search for information, who they turn to when in need of help with information retrieval, what they are satisfied versus dissatisfied with at the library, what they consider to be the library's most important service and what future services they would welcome.

The focus group interviews were carried out as three 2-hour sessions in October 2011. As seventeen students volunteered to participate, the library was able to form three groups, consisting of students representing all faculties at the university and having different experiences of university studies. The sessions were opened with a short presentation of the aim of the study, along with some refreshments and snacks. At the end of the sessions the moderator summarized the discussion and presented everyone with a cinema ticket as a thanks.

4.2. Key findings from the interviews

Surprisingly enough participants in all three sessions agreed on most issues. The library as a physical environment was considered very important. The participants spoke of the library as their "workplace", "a place for getting information" and "a social meeting place". Especially reading rooms and group study rooms were much appreciated.

The library's materials and resources were also appreciated but it was considered difficult to find what one needs. More guides for using databases and more instruction in information retrieval, at the right point of time and as integrated studies, were requested. It was disappointing to hear that students rarely turn to librarians when in need of help with information retrieval, but

prefer fellow students or the teacher. On the other hand they were eager to hear that the library offers individual guidance. The library's structure with campus libraries, with differing opening hours, call numbers and placement of material, was considered confusing.

The library received positive feedback for its presence in social media, and suggestions were made that the library should develop these into more interactive services. On the other hand, physical spaces and printed books were, contrary to our preconceived notions, preferred to social media platforms and e-books.

5. Focus groups with researchers

5.1. Planning and implementing the interviews

After the successful implementation of focus groups with students and the positive feedback from participants, it was decided to carry through similar focus group interviews with researchers as the target group. Researchers constitute the second largest group of patrons at the university and are quite a challenging user group.

This time the recruitment was realized by e-mail to researchers, invitation flyers in the staff's coffee rooms at the departments, on webpages and in social media as well as in the news bulletin for the staff at the university. The criteria for the number and size of the focus groups as well as the venue for the interviews were kept the same.

The questionnaire was developed especially for researchers, consisting of questions about their opinions on open access, bibliometrics and reference management in addition to more general questions about how and where they search for information and what their future requirements are.

The focus group interviews were carried out as three 2-hour sessions in late October and early November 2012. As eighteen researchers volunteered to participate, the library was again able to form three groups, consisting of researchers representing all faculties at the university and having different experiences of research. The sessions were carried out in a similar manner as the previous ones. As a thanks for their participation in the interviews the researchers were given a gift voucher to a bookshop.

5.2. Key findings from the interviews

Once again it was startling to discover that the participants agreed on most issues. The library's role in the researchers' everyday life was considered an important one. Statements such as "the library is the foundation for my research" and "the library is my research assistant" were rewarding to hear. The personal contact with library staff as well as individual guidance were highly desired.

The library's materials and resources were appreciated, but the researchers expressed feelings of not knowing thoroughly what the library offers and how to find relevant material. They preferred using Google and Google Scholar to the library's databases and sometimes didn't even know that the articles they accessed were made available by the library. They also strongly encouraged the library to intensify its marketing strategies in order to guarantee that the patrons know what the library has to offer.

Concerning issues about open access and bibliometrics the participants were vague, but in general open for all kinds of more integrated library services.

6. Results

By discussing their library and information needs, the participants provided the library with a large quantity of qualitative patron data that have up to now been lacking. All comments during the interviews were compiled in two separate reports and development strategies for the library's present and future services have been defined and some already implemented. Furthermore, the study also opened views generally on the users' experiences and expectations.

As a result of the focus group study several improvements have been implemented at the library. The library catalogue, Alma, was made easier to read and understand by deleting obsolete terms and a map of all campus libraries was created. We intensified the marketing of our courses in information retrieval by leaflets that are distributed to reading rooms, lending desks and noticeboards on library premises. The staff began using nameplates, an issue that had been discussed every now and then but only now was finally realized. We introduced the Book a Librarian service as well as developed specific Research Services as part of the library's webpages.

Among issues the library should develop further are improvement of marketing strategies, the construction of guides (both printed and electronic versions) for the usage of specific databases, development of an information retrieval course for doctoral candidates and more events at the campus libraries, for instance visiting hours specifically for researchers. It was also considered important for the staff at the library to continuously participate in different kinds of further education and training in order to be able to meet the demands of our patrons.

The focus group participants claimed they had learned many new things about the library and declared they would not hesitate to get in touch with librarians when having problems related to library issues in the future. Some of the participants became friends with the library on Facebook and made comments on our blog.

The results of the focus group study were distributed, not only to the participants but to the university at large, by posting the results on the university's webpage, in addition to the library's webpage and its social media

platforms. This way, we wanted to show the library's efforts so far and how important a customer perspective is for us.

The results were also presented to the whole library staff. By sharing the results with everyone we succeeded in creating a feeling of togetherness, i.e. that we are all working towards a common end with our patrons in focus.

7. Conclusions

The focus group method proved to be very successful in terms of encouraging library users to express their views on our current services. The discussions were lively and some of the findings even surprising. Some of the contributions and feelings expressed could never have been caught through a statistical survey. The participants actually gave some very useful ideas for developing library services. All in all, the focus group sessions proved to be interesting and pleasant occasions where honest opinions and in depth discussions were feasible.

The method also proved to be an effective marketing tool for the library and during the whole process the library has received positive feedback on its initiative. Both student and researcher participants appreciated the library's effort to listen to their patrons. They were also pleased with the occasion for discussing important issues face to face with library representatives. The library representatives agreed that the interview sessions had given them in-depth information about the patrons' needs as well as a deeper understanding of how to meet patrons' needs and wishes.

By sharing the findings with the whole of the library staff, a greater team spirit was developed and everyone felt engaged in developing the library's future services. We were at the same time reminded of the fact that we are there for our patrons and not just for ourselves. A dialogue with our patrons has increasingly raised our motivation for further development in the right direction.

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