

Methodological Reflections on Planning and Conducting Focus Groups

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Abstract

The presenter will share a recent experience that highlights the necessity of fluid thinking when conducting research. A focus group was planned as the culmination of a project where college students explored their disability identity through making mixed-media art in a newly developed arts-based makerspace. While the participants were highly engaged and previous conversations were rich with group meaning making, attendance for the focus group was not as anticipated. One participant arrived early, a second arrived twenty-five minutes late—just five minutes after the interviewer decided to shift to an individual interview—and a third arrived forty-five minutes late. This led to, over a ninety-minute timeslot, shifting from an individual interview to a dual interview followed by another interview witnessed by the first two interviewees that finally morphed into the collaborative discussion of a focus group. Reflections on balancing research design and the actuality of conducting research will be shared.

Keywords: Fluidity, Focus Group, Interviewing Practices, Empathy, Complexity

Methodological Reflections on Planning and Conducting Focus Groups

In this paper I offer reflections on a focus group that I conducted as the culminating activity for a research project. The project took place in August through October of 2022 within the university disability services office where I work. My boss and I are both doctoral students in the Learning, Leadership, and Organization Development program at the University of Georgia, and we have reimaged our conference room as an arts-based makerspace. The furniture is all modular; there are adjustable-height work benches and a conference table that splits into three separate tables. This research project was part of the inaugural art project for students. I set up stations for papercrafts, watercolors, and mixed media projects. The project served a dual purpose: I wanted to study disability identity in college students because there is little published on the topic and the students' art would be displayed on campus as part of the student group's advocacy work.

Participants were all registered with disability services for at least one disability, and they all self-selected into joining the disability advocacy student group and attending this session. The prompt for the artwork, which I told them was a guide that they did not need to follow if it did not resonate with them, was to create a 3-panel art project on their relationship with their disability. Each panel was to have a different audience: the self, other students with disabilities, and the broader university population. The students were also asked to write a short artist statement to be displayed with their art.

Nothing went to plan from the very start. The art portion of the project was supposed to happen in April 2022, but then the planned makerspace did not actualize until August. When we held the event, due to the gatekeeper choosing to combine the art project with a general information meeting, around half the attendees were there for pizza and information more so

than for the art project. This gave me a taste of the beauty that can emerge from things not going to plan: the reluctant artists made some of the most moving pieces all because the pizza was late. Out of 12 participants, no one followed the prompt. The art and artist statements from that first session were powerful, and I had a few students ask to take their work home to work on more.

I was hopeful for the focus group. We had an engaged group of students that expressed interest in participating in the focus group/debrief after the art project. As the student organization meets monthly, I planned the focus group during the same time slot (Thursday from 4pm-6pm) as the art assignment in the hopes I would draw the same students. We only invited those who attended the art session. Unfortunately, I did not factor midterm exams into the timing. Emily, my gatekeeper, sent out the announcement and only two students responded. She sent out follow-ups two days prior and the day of the focus group, and she did not receive any other responses. One of the two respondents said she would be late, so I started preparing for my focus group to turn into individual interviews. I was a little nervous, but at least I had previously had positive conversations with both potential attendees. Both were graduate students: the student population less likely to have midterms.

My primary concern was the number and type of questions I had prepared were based on anticipating a focus group of five or more participants. I have learned from past interviews that I tend to insert filler dialogue in the middle of the interview when the interviewee is not talkative and I fear the interview is winding down too quickly, so I reflected on *not doing that* before the interview: remembering to be comfortable with silence (and make silence comfortable through not putting any anxiety out in the interaction), to practice active listening, and to be kind to myself if I do not wholly conform to textbook interview practice.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

As a doctoral student studying qualitative research, I am in the thick of exploring where I align theoretically. Structure is important as I learn what I am doing, but I am also keenly aware that working with people is messy. Having a flexible mindset is essential, even if we are working within rigid frameworks for IRB and site access. As researchers, we must be able to find balance in the structured and unstructured elements of research practice. The trick seems to be making a plan while acknowledging that the plan is only one part of the research dynamic that includes many things out of your control.

As I will discuss in the next section, I crafted focus group questions based on expert guidance coming from constructivist perspectives (Carspecken, 2013; Hall, 2020). My perspective is best described as New Materialist (Coole & Frost, 2010; Barad, 2007). My theoretical influences are often included under critical theory, but they all share an interest in flows and interconnections that align with New Materialisms. Foucauldian power (1977), Butler's gender performativity (1993), and Bourdieu's field theory (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1993) all discuss the individual as shaped by and a part of their broader context. This theme is further explored through the newer theories included within New Materialisms and posthumanism.

I had hoped that the research project would allow for an exploration of the flows and entanglements of disability identity as the students engaged in different contexts with different audiences. Barad (2007) offered a succinct description of the complexity of entanglements:

To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an

individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating. (p. ix)

Disability identity reaches far beyond the individual body. A diagnosis lies within the interconnections of medical practices and formally recognized diagnoses which in turn are influenced by time, location, culture, the knowledge of the diagnosing medical professional, and so on. Beyond the diagnosis itself, the time of onset and many socioeconomic factors have major impacts on how one conceptualizes their disability. A diagnosis does not grant immediate, deep knowledge of the condition; there is an ongoing unfolding of understanding that is never complete. As a disability services professional with my own lived experience of disability diagnosis and management, I thought that New Materialism could offer an interesting view of these entanglements I knew so intimately. The students, however, took the project in a different direction.

Flint et al. (2022) stated that “post-qualitative approaches embrace a conceptualization of agency as entangled between human and more-than-human bodies and offer an epistemological and ontological shift from questions of meaning to questions of production, force, intensity, and flow” (p. 2). For this project, I was interested in how students make meaning of their disability status based on different audiences: a question that aligns with my interest in the fluidity of identity (Briadotti, 2011). During the art event and through their artist statements, students rejected the idea that they should make art for anyone but themselves. They still wanted their art displayed, but it was personal to them. When only 1.5 RSVPs came in for the focus group, my plans were once again challenged by my participants. I started to second guess my approach and adapted the focus group questions for an individual interview, although it would be quite short without the group discussion. Every step of this project was first planned and then adapted based

on material and interpersonal conditions. The next section will discuss the planning process for the focus group, and the following section will discuss the fluid reality.

My Plan

I created the following semi-structured focus group protocol using Carspecken's (2013) interview protocol model and Hall's (2020) framework for focus groups. I chose to conduct the focus group in the same room as the group's previous meetings, including the art project, to aid in creating a "supportive and safe normative environment" (Carspecken, p. 155) for the participants. Based on Carspecken, the interview protocol has 2 topic domains with a lead-off question that is "designed to open up a topic domain that one wishes a subject to address" (p. 156), a list of covert categories "that you wish your subject to address during her talk but that you do not want to ask explicitly about because that could lead the interview too much" (p. 157), and potential follow-up questions for each domain. I planned to have participants introduce themselves once again to each other as a warm-up (Hall, 2020), for each participant to be given a chance to answer each question, and to wrap up the interview with a closing question that summarizes what has been said and allows participants to add their perspectives. In reality, only the last point materialized.

Focus Group Protocol

Topic Domain: Expressing Disability Identity Through Art

Lead-off Questions

- Tell us about the artwork(s) you created during the last meeting (with their art as a visual aid).
- Walk me through the art-making process.

Covert categories

Touches on both research questions: How does representation of disability identity by college students change based on audience? How do disabled students/ students with disabilities (SWDs) represent those differences through art?

Follow-up Questions

- If you had to do the project again, is there anything you would change?
- As you look at your art today, what do you notice?

Topic Domain: Audience***Lead-off Questions***

- What do you hope viewers of your work take away?

Covert Categories

Asks participants to imagine people viewing their work. What do they hope their art conveys? Who is their imagined audience?

Follow-up Questions

- When you imagined someone viewing your art, who was your imaginary audience member?
- What else would you want to tell the person viewing your art?

Summary Question (Hall, 2020)

- What common themes have you noticed from our discussion today? And/or:
- During our time today, I noticed several themes (elaborate). Do you think I summarized those themes correctly?

My Reality

The first participant arrived 20 minutes early. I had most of the artwork from the last session, but this participant was one of the two who asked to bring hers home to continue working on it. As I imagined the focus group while preparing the protocol, I expected participants to be viewing their artwork for the first time since they created it. Because participant one brought her artwork, my potential follow-up question *As you look at your art today, what do you notice?* did not apply.

As participant one arrived 20 minutes early and my only other RSVP said she would be around 40 minutes late, I was stressed. Participant one did not have anywhere to be, but I wanted to be a good steward of her time. She was also eager to interact with other students, so I felt the fear of disappointing her if no one else showed up. She picked up a magazine and began a collage while we waited for others. At 20 minutes past our prescribed start time, 40 minutes after participant one arrived, we started a solo interview. I changed the first question just slightly from *Tell us about the artwork(s) you created during the last meeting* to *So, can you get us started by just kind of telling me a little bit about your artwork?* Because there wasn't an *us* to tell and she did not create hers during the last meeting.

A few minutes into her response, a second participant, one who did not RSVP, arrived. This student also brought artwork she created since the last session. Perhaps I could have anticipated that the students who took their work home would be more inclined to attend because they had something to return to me for the project. After welcomes were exchanged and their art was mutually fawned over, participant one continued with her response while participant two worked on a second, partially finished piece. When participant one finished answering the first question, I offered a little more explainer to participant two and asked the informal version of my

first question: *You wanna tell us about your work?* Participant two had not only brought new artwork, she incorporated techniques and materials outside of what we had available in the makerspace.

Both participants addressed my follow-up questions for my first topic area in their initial answers, so I jumped down to the second topic area: audience. The prescribed question was *What do you hope viewers of your work take away?* What I actually asked was *Did you have a viewer in mind when you made these?* Both answered the question in turn, further rebuffing the idea that art should be made for an audience. They referenced the other's response, but it did not blossom into a focus group discussion.

At this point, my mind is racing. We are only 10 minutes into the interview that was supposed to be an hour-long focus group, I only have two participants, and they have completely negated my follow-up questions. They so completely dismissed the idea of audience—which is a super intriguing finding—that I could not imagine pressing the issue by asking one of the follow-up audience questions right away. I only had two topic areas and then a wrap-up question, so I start to ramble a little: *Yeah, I think- so as the one who wrote the prompt- like I recognized I made it much too complicated.* [Participants shake their heads in disagreement.] *Like I mean, everyone- I'm so happy that everyone just was like, this is, you know, that was certainly a freedom that was within it, but I'm very happy that everyone was just like, "okay, no, this is what works for me" with this. So, that's pretty cool. Have you guys heard of photovoice?*

They had not, so I explained Photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997) and once again went over my intention with the project. My interjection gave them more context to work with and gave me time to think about how to restructure the questions. I ended by asking *So, you know, even if the art was not created for an external viewer, what do you hope people take away from*

it? This question took my planned follow-up question *What else would you want to tell the person viewing your art?* and shifted it from being grounded in the artist's attempt at activism to that of empathetic projection: imagine you are the viewer—what do you hope they take away? This elicited deep reflections from the participants and allowed me to get around to the prescribed question *What else would you want to tell the person viewing your art?*

During the responses, a third participant, the one who had warned she would be late, arrived. I told her that the other two were just finishing up and asked her to hang out and listen while we finished and then I would ask her the questions. As the dual interview wound down, participant three commented on the artwork of the other two. As we transitioned to participant three answering the questions, the first two focused on their new art projects and listening. Participant three fit my imagined respondent more closely than the first two, so I was able to run through my questions smoothly. As it sometimes happens, it was like she knew the questions and was leading me to the next one. She was detailed in her descriptions and took around 15 minutes to answer the topic questions and follow-ups.

When I transitioned to the wrap-up questions, I started to ask *What connections did you all see between what others said and what, what you were you know, you're-* and participant one jumped in and started to draw connections, talking to the other participants instead of to me. The conversation meandered and bounced between the participants, answering the question but also discussing their experiences as students with disabilities and how that related to their responses and art. Even after I stopped recording, the group stayed and talked for another 40 minutes. It was a long and non-linear road, but the focus group finally came together.

Implications for Future Studies

Hall (2020) noted that “not every aspect of the focus group discussion can be predicted in advance... because focus groups, like your design, are lively and dynamic” (p. 42) but argued “a focus group protocol is still necessary and valuable, affording a systematic procedure for data collection” (p. 42). I agree with Hall. I was able to keep my composure during data collection when nothing was going to plan because I had so thoroughly made a plan. My thoughts, redirections, and even my interjection about Photovoice were all in service of steering the conversation toward my research questions. Using Carspecken’s (2013) framework helped me keep the underlying inquiries in mind, not just the pre-formulated research questions. The end product, although something I never could have foreseen, is remarkably close to what I set out to do.

My participants were active partners in exploring concepts around disability identity, audience, and art. They continued to create and connect after the focus group was over. As a practitioner, I aimed for what Cho and Trent (2006) termed transformational validity: “a progressive, emancipatory process leading toward social change that is to be achieved by the research endeavor itself (p. 322). Participants acted as if the focus group was time well spent and furthered their connections with one another through the focus group. New Materialism acted as my theoretical foundation as I actively engaged with the flows and entanglements of a focus group that took its time in materializing.

Especially with a New Materialist approach, this paper is a little awkward as I conducted the focus group under a class IRB and cannot share the participants’ words. In some ways, this underscores the need to look at interviewing practice holistically. My role as the facilitator is only a small part of the picture. The room, the art supplies, the completed and in-progress art

pieces, and the participants all shaped the interaction. The students had met each other before and knew they had the common experiences of attending the same university and having a disability. Within those commonalities a plethora of differences exists, and they were open to each other's stories.

Wherever awkward pauses could have existed, the participants were commenting on the others' art. Their creative expression facilitated connection. One of my primary takeaways is the importance of space and materials in creating a welcoming, collaborative atmosphere to foster focus group discussion. When participant one arrived early, rather than just sitting there or looking at her phone, she was able to choose-her-own-art-adventure. She happily flipped through a magazine to make a collage and was supportive of me as the facilitator as I tried to be flexible while waiting for more participants. The physical space and the art supplies mitigated awkwardness and anxiety, my own included.

While the physical space assisted in the interconnectedness of the focus group, the temporal element was not in my favor. The first student organization meeting in August had ten highly engaged students attend. While my co-facilitator and I had a plan for the session, the students took charge from the start, asking each other questions and beginning introductions before we had a chance to. My idea for the focus group came from that first discussion, but the vibrant, eager energy of the beginning of the semester had dissipated by the mid-semester focus group. The students still wanted to meet and connect with one another, but midterm exams and projects took precedence. No amount of focus group protocol planning could overcome my timing. It was a very practical lesson on the entanglements of research participants and the fluid and nomadic nature of identity (Briadotti, 2011): the same individuals at different points in time, even if the difference is just two months, will be different.

Conclusion

While no part of this research project went according to plan, I am quite pleased with how it went. As a novice researcher, it pushed me toward a more participatory approach, taught me the importance of making a thorough-but-fluid plan, and closed the gap between the theory I read and my research practice. Barad's (2007) work on entanglements and Briadotti's (2011) nomadic identity theory were used not just in the planning and analysis but also in how I interacted with participants. Carspecken's (2013) interview protocol allowed me to move with the conversation(s) rather than attempting to force order on the situation. This experience reinforced for me that, in research and in life, one must recognize that we are not in control. We can have an impact, but we are part of a broad, complex system. The title of *researcher* does not grant any special powers to control time, space, and participants, and we must learn to act accordingly.

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