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Focus groups and ELICOS evaluation

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This article questions the use of the questionnaire as a traditional form of course evaluation by students in ELICOS programs, and suggests that focus groups might provide a more appropriate source of feedback. It deals with an enquiry approach applied to evaluations of ELICOS programs and the relationships forged with its student stakeholders based on adaptations of strategies used in corporate sector organisations. It argues that, by adapting strategies employed as part of corporate sector marketing practices and protocols, it is possible to conduct investigations of ELICOS issues, and evaluation of ELICOS programs, which allows for specific grouping of features under review. This at the same time provides opportunities for students to engage the process of evaluation in more general terms. Such exercises would allow for the generation of relevant and timely descriptions that go beyond the forms, formats and language of written evaluations. It should be noted, though, that this article does not deal with questions of assessment and student progress.

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Introduction

Evaluation of ELICOS programs tends to be an integral feature of English teaching practice. Implicit within this is the assumption that evaluation can be undertaken with the full participation of the students. A complication arising from the cultural differences in teaching and learning in different cultures is no small part of a problem that an evaluative study encounters. Hofstede (1986: 301), considering only two cultures in the sort of context in which ELICOS work proceeds, sees this as one of many 'perplexities'. These 'can be due to different social positions of teachers and students in the two societies, to differences in the relevance of the curriculum for the two societies, to differences in profiles of cognitive abilities between the populations of the two societies, or to differences in expected teacher/student and student/student interaction'.

At the same time, the very culture in which we are evaluating our programs is changing. Savage (1996) refers to the 'unique' role of ELICOS centres as administrative and academic enterprises. Crichton (1994: 8) explores changes in teacher-student relationships when students become clients, where, by virtue of such status, they are owed 'a debt of satisfaction'. As ELICOS providers we are in step with most of the market place underpinnings as to commercial considerations of internationalisation of education in Australia (Cox, 2001), even if we prefer to consider ourselves teachers first and foremost (Savage, 1996; Crichton, 1994). This has become an inescapable fact of our practice, as we have witnessed market place discourses come to preeminence in our field.

Markets

Increasingly, the teaching and learning situation in which we operate is couched in marketing terms, such as the West Report (West, 1998: 16-20) which airs its own views of its brief in references to 'knowledge-based industries', the emergence of education as a major export earner for Australia and its contention that 'Many of the current practices ... would not have survived in an open market'. Our successes in that market suggest a particularly effective set of practices. Marginson (1997: 2) has encapsulated the emerging trends. 'The age of student-centred lifelong learning is upon us, in which everyone will be a "customer", with a glittering array of options from TAFE, universities and global providers on the Internet'. In what has become the ELICOS industry, similar descriptions apply. The cost of acquisition of English language proficiency, coupled with the now virtually compulsory International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score for entry to Australian institutions comes at a high price, and demand drives the price and the value upwards rather than otherwise. Dahringer (1994: 146) sees the next focus for marketing activities for the corporate sector being on services, (they currently account for 30% of world trade) which will become 'the site for the next great battle for global corporations' in the form of telecommunications, business services, entertainment, banking, finance, insurance, tourism and education. Indeed the industry turnover has turned out to be just the amount of the budget surplus announced for the 2000-2001 financial year (Cox, 2001).

At the same time, we are involved in a complex situation implied by cultural diversity. As Kaplan (1966) points out in relation to second language teaching, we have recognised the culture variation as a factor to be taken into account when teaching our ELICOS courses. Cultural variation is no less an important issue when it comes to evaluation of our programs. Evaluation has become so much a part of what we consider best practice that we no longer question its need or merit, but I am not sure that we have accounted for cultural variations when we assume this in the first place.

Kaplan highlights an aspect of our circumstances that has been followed up in study after study (see for example Hofstede, 1986; Samuelowicz, 1987; Nathan, 1993; Oliver & Ratcliff, 1998). Yet we ask students who, according to at least one source of data in these studies, hold attitudes that construct teachers and lecturers as some sort of gods (Samuelowicz, 1987: 124), to comment on the way they have been taught by these same august beings. We ask students from tribal systems where not all knowledge is available to all and where elders speak for the whole group (Zeegers, 2000; 1996) to give their individual, analytical and critical views on their teachers, the perceived sources of all knowledge, and we ask it in language that assumes a facility with the language of evaluation without ever having indicated what this means. We use questionnaires, surveys, and written commentary because we have good reason to think that these are effective tools in helping us to find out what we want to know with people who understand these as tools and who are familiar with the ways in which they are to be handled. I question their use with people from non-English speaking backgrounds where critical engagement with classroom materials alone

constitutes a challenge to familiar concepts of teacher-student relations and rights accorded to those who may speak, and those who may not.

Illustrations

Let me illustrate with a particularly expressive set of questions that I have encountered in such evaluation exercises: What were the highlights of your course of study? I think it is a good question, but I was administering the questionnaire, and found that it was a question that these students simply did not understand. This lack of understanding was of a purely lexical turn—they had not encountered the word highlights before, and they did not like to ask me to explain it and thus highlight their own ignorance. It was followed by another, which I rather liked for its logic and its suggestion of whimsy: What were the lowlights of your course of study? Students who could not get the first one were hopelessly lost with this one. As well, students who had little enough experience in evaluation of English courses were also asked to make written comments to enlarge upon their answers—again, all quite reasonable exercises in an Western English-speaking context, but a little off the track in this one. I compiled the results, and they showed the students were eminently satisfied with the course and had no complaints whatsoever, and certainly no suggestions for improvements for everything was just perfect.

Validity

Oliver and Ratcliff (1998: 45) point out the problem of 'approval tendency' as having the potential to skew figures, and I would suggest that here is a case in point where the students could not answer in any way other than in a positive sense if they were not to look foolish. There are also Likert scale exercises for indicating satisfaction or otherwise, with opportunity for written comment. Here, lack of the quite sophisticated writing skills and the vocabulary requirements, not to mention the disinclination to criticise one's valued teacher, mitigate against finding out what students really think of what they have bought in the expensive ELICOS market place. It is quite a conceptual leap to distinguish between the teacher delivering a course and the course itself, and nuances of language may not facilitate an easy grasp of that distinction. I have come to consider these as gratuitous evaluation exercises.

Focus Groups

I decided to attempt to use the very same marketing tools that others in the marketplace use. I turned to the Focus Group. This is where a group of 8-10 persons are brought to a centralised place to respond to questions or a topic of particular interest to a person or an organisation, traditionally a client (Frey & Fontana, 1993: 30). Robert Merton and his collaborators, credited with initiating the method during World War II, may have set out to examine the effectiveness of wartime propaganda efforts, but its hallmark then and now is the explicit use of group interaction to produce insights not as easily gained by other methods. It was redesigned and adapted for market research purposes, rather than for educational research, but that does not mean that it cannot be used for that purpose. This is especially so when the aim of the research involves understanding of success or failure of

a particular program in a specific setting (Morgan & Kreuger, 1993). It ought to be stressed, however, that focus groups do not determine educational progress of the students. Tests, assignments, presentations and so on do this. This is not a function of the Focus Group.

Sink (1991: 197-198) reports on use of the method on his MPA groups, 'ask[ing] questions similar to those of the marketer: Is my program (product) a good one? Does it satisfy the needs of my constituent groups (customers)? Does it do the job it purports to do?'. He found that 'a well-designed and executed focus group creates an environment of trust in which participants reticent to express their opinions feel comfortable to interact.' My own use of a similar method has led me to similar conclusions.

Group

It is the group itself that is of utmost importance here. The participants do not just react to the facilitator/moderator of the group on a one-to-one basis; they react and interact with each other as they explore aspects that come up in the discussion. This sort of dynamic and spontaneous interaction in a small group can be conversational and non-threatening to the students themselves, open to nuances and shades of meaning. These last are not overt features on a Likert scale or in a questionnaire. In fact, a major advantage of the Focus Group is that, as Morgan and Krueger (1988: 15) point out, it is especially useful when working with categories of people who have historically had limited power and influence. Given the cultural slant of our students' status vis-à-vis their teachers, this is a salient consideration, and it allows considerable probing, especially as the paralinguistic features of the group interaction are taken into account.

Conduct

The groups that I have conducted have all started with a clear indication of what we were doing; that the courses and teaching were good, but that we did not 'have to be sick to get better' (Power, 1997). This phrase has proved invaluable. It has always been received with a sort of relief by each group of students, realising that they would not be behaving in a disrespectful manner towards their teachers. It has allowed me to make a start based on an important principle of focus groups: information gathering through social events involving the interaction of participants and the interplay and modification of ideas, and the generation of rich data in the form of personal opinions 'derived from social rather than personal processes' (Albrecht, Johnson & Walther 1993: 54). It meant the comfort and security of the group, and the notion that one's opinion was valid and valued. Breaking up the topics into aspects of the course(s) moreover allowed participants to generate discussion on very specific aspects as good, bad, needing adjustment or whatever.

It has meant that they were not put into a position of endorsing or disapproving of the entirety of a unit, a teacher's approach or facet of the course(s). It has enabled them to start with the more comfortable aspects of approval and acceptance of their approval, talking along these lines until a 'but' evidenced itself in a look or a shrug, and exploring further. By

keeping the focus on how the 'but' affected the students rather than how it had been generated by a teacher or a course, I have been able to probe a little more deeply and to follow tangential issues that had not occurred to any of us. Sink (1991: 199) makes the point that Focus Groups 'obtain the participants' responses to questions about the quality or value of the coursework in the program, about the interactive experience between faculty and students and among the students, and about the continued usefulness of the program in satisfying market needs...'. It is important, however, to keep this last consideration in mind: Focus Groups do not substitute for assessment.

Moderator

To enable all of this to happen implies an important role for the moderator. An appreciation of criticism as a positive force in evaluating programs and practice is implied in such a role (not necessarily shared by ELICOS students whose own backgrounds do not permit such critical analysis). The metaphors of miner or traveller are useful (Kvale 1996: 6). One may delve deeply, and one may travel across the discussion, picking up meanings as it progresses. As it is a structured and purposeful conversation, not an unplanned, spontaneous dialogue, as Greenbaum (2000) would have it, the authoritarian role of the Focus Group moderator is vital, if the efficiency and the quality of the data gathered is not to be adversely affected. Greenbaum advises the pursuit of non-verbal signs, these being at least as significant as the words that are spoken, if not more so. As ELICOS teachers, we are well versed in the importance of these signs, as are our students, if we have taught them well, and they can respond in kind.

It allows discussion to generate issues that would not normally emerge, and the non-verbal perspective adds a valuable dimension enriching the data. At the same time, the moderator must ensure the non-threatening environment in which a free and frank interchange of views is encouraged. This does require some preparation, based on a clear understanding of what and how discussion is to occur. The moderator will focus the discussion, ensuring that no one person dominates, that a full range of viewpoints is raised within the group (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2001: 57). Some of the more obvious points for consideration are gender issues, where female students feel intimidated by the notion of speaking their minds in front of male students (also culturally unacceptable) and of older students being accorded customary respect by virtue of their age and thus allowed more freedom to speak than younger ones. The authority of the moderator should help to overcome these. Finally, the moderator should draw the session to a close by summarising what has been gleaned, checking this with participants. It reinforces the importance of what they have just given of themselves. For they have given of themselves, much more than just their time. Albrecht et al (1993: 64) insist, 'Focus groups are clearly communication events that should not be taken for granted'. Participants now have the opportunity for refining their input, and for helping to establish a consensus within this particular group.

Analysis

There is the question of what to do with the data generated. Tape transcription is usually completed as soon as possible after the session, and the moderator's notes will help to fill in any paralinguistic gaps. The moderator will manipulate and interpret this raw data, turning it into information (Alreck & Settle, 1995: 404) for dissemination. Usually a simple descriptive narrative will do (Stewart & Shamdesai, 1990: 102). The report is presented and further discussion occurs as those involved work through material that will have emerged. More than this, though, is consideration of how student suggestions are to be implemented.

Conclusion

ELICOS students in Focus Groups will have been sought out to tell us things of which we most need to be aware, and perhaps even things we had not wanted to hear. Whether we consider ourselves academic or not, we are providing valuable and expensive services to clients. To have their views taken seriously enough to implement them is our own mark of respect. It goes a little beyond that debt of satisfaction owed to ELICOS students, as paying customers, to which Crichton (1994) refers, but it is at this point that mechanisms, protocols and procedures may be put in place. The next round of Focus Groups will no doubt have comments on these as well.

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