



Bourne, J. E., & Winstone, N. (2021). Empowering students' voices: The use of activity-oriented focus groups in higher education research. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2020.1777964>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1080/1743727X.2020.1777964](https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2020.1777964)

[Link to publication record on the Bristol Research Portal](#)
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Taylor and Francis at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1743727X.2020.1777964?scroll=top&needAccess=true&journalCode=cwse20>. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol – Bristol Research Portal

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/brp-terms/>

RUNNING HEAD: Activity-oriented questions in student focus groups

Abstract

Surfacing student voices is of utmost importance in higher education institutions. However, use of large-scale student surveys may not represent the most effective method of eliciting meaningful student perspectives. Focus groups have the potential to elicit a more authentic student voice through greater engagement with students. Furthermore, activities incorporated into these discussions may be beneficial in the higher education context. The aim of this manuscript is to explore the use of activities in focus group discussions within a project focussed on students' use of feedback. We draw on focus group discussion transcripts, debrief transcripts, field notes and activity artefacts to demonstrate how activities can be incorporated into focus group discussions. The findings indicate several benefits to using activities in higher education focus group discussions. As such, a framework to guide use of activities, based on the purpose of the focus groups, is provided within the context of higher education research.

Key words: focus groups; methodology; higher education; qualitative research

Introduction

Large-scale surveys of students' experiences are ubiquitous in higher education systems across the world. For example, the National Student Survey in the UK, the Course Experience Questionnaire in Australia, and the National Survey for Student Engagement (USA) are framed as means through which the 'student voice' can be expressed. However, Lygo-Baker, Kinchin, and Winstone (2019) caution against the 'single voice fallacy', where it is often assumed that the emerging 'voice' represents the views of all students. Placing emphasis on the findings of such surveys risks reducing students to 'data points' (e.g., Parmenter, 2017), where the perception of a 'singular funnelled voice' (Lygo-Baker et al., 2019) obscures individual voices. Surveys also focus on students' post hoc perceptions of their experience, rather than providing students with opportunities to suggest solutions.

Whilst surveys of the student experience can, if taken at face value, homogenise students' perspectives, focus groups provide students with opportunities to express their perspectives in a more authentic and dialogic way, and are widely used in higher education research (e.g., Lea, Stephenson & Troy, 2003; Moule, Ward, Lockyer, 210; Smith, 2017; Trahar & Hyland, 2011). In this article, we highlight current attempts to surface student voices within higher education institutions and highlight why these methods may not fully represent students' true perspectives. In contrast, focus group discussions offer the potential to engage with students as partners and surface a more authentic voice. In addition, we propose that activity-oriented focus groups (Colucci, 2007) provide a space within which students feel comfortable expressing their perspectives through a variety of media. To demonstrate the benefits of utilising activities within focus group discussions we present an analysis of a series of activity-oriented focus groups conducted with first year undergraduate students as part of a project exploring students' use of feedback. We conclude by offering a framework for the use of activity-oriented focus groups in higher education research.

A brief history of student voice in higher education

In its broadest sense student voice represents the contribution that students make to the higher education system through the evaluation of courses, policies, and procedures, and through involvement in institutional learning and teaching development. Over the past few years the importance of student voice has become increasingly prominent (Freeman, 2016). Largely driven by the introduction and ensuing increases in tuition fees in 2012, student experience and engagement are at the forefront of institutional agendas. However, appropriate means of operationalising student voice have been debated, with a variety of methodologies being utilised including both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Seale, 2010; Seale et al., 2015).

The introduction of the National Student Survey (NSS) and the increased use of module evaluation questionnaires have been perceived as means through which to increase the reach of the student voice from the few to the many. However, Fielding (2011) argues that the use of quantitative data, such as the NSS, uses students' perspectives as a data source that serves institutional agendas, failing to engage students as genuine research partners or active participants (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2016). Mockler and Groundwater-Smith (2015) suggest that the data collected from these large-scale institutional surveys do not represent authentic student voice. Rather, the authors propose that "authentic student voice work involves the building of generative relationships and the joint engagement of adults and young people in the research enterprise" (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2015, p. 162). Interestingly, students themselves do not perceive these formal mechanisms as enabling student voice. Rather, students see greater value in activities which allow them to engage in discussion, which can leave students feeling empowered and valued (Freeman, 2016). One

method that has been proposed to help surface authentic student voice and to evoke meaningful interactions and debate is the focus group discussion.

Focus groups in higher education

The focus group discussion is a qualitative method that explores participants' perceptions, feelings, attitudes or ideas around a given issue or experience (Kevern & Webb, 2001). Focus group discussions involve a group of individuals who possess certain characteristics, discussing a specified topic which is guided by a facilitator (Morgan, 1997). The discussion of a specific topic is one of the defining features of 'focussed' group discussions (Merton & Kendall, 1946). Conducting discussions in groups, as opposed to individually, allows for the observation of group dynamics, providing insight into why individuals may agree or disagree on perceptions or ideas and providing a space for the generation of new ideas. Individuals can qualify responses or build on the responses of others. Focus group discussions (hereon in referred to as focus groups) often lead to a feeling of empowerment for participants, as a result of being valued as the expert and having the opportunity to work with the researcher and collaborate with others (Gibbs, 1997). Furthermore, students are often more comfortable sharing their thoughts in groups as there may be a sense of collective agreement, making the student more inclined to provide feedback and share with the group (Hollander, 2004; Warr, 2005). Based on these perceived benefits, focus groups are now one of the most widely used research tools in the social sciences (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015). Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2015) suggest that focus groups provide a potential method through which to surface student voice within higher education.

Traditional focus groups involve a series of questions presented by the facilitator and answers provided by members of the group, with probing questions serving to delve deeper into responses. However, students' perceptions of the facilitator, which may incorporate

issues relating to status and power, can influence what participants are willing to share and how candid they feel they can be (Hopkins, 2007; Parker & Tritter, 2006). Furthermore, in some situations, the abstract nature of the topic, or the nuances of the purpose of the project, may create challenges. In situations such as these, supplementing traditional approaches to questioning with activities and tasks can be beneficial.

Activity-oriented focus groups

In Krueger and Casey's (2014) guide to conducting focus groups, they propose a series of questions designed to engage participants in dialogue including rating (discussing how to rate a list of items on a scale), ranking (discussing how to rank a list of terms on the basis of set criteria) and listing (generating a set of ideas within a specified domain). Colucci (2007) states that these 'questions' reflect activities and exercises rather than traditional questions, offering an alternative method of eliciting information. In this section we outline what we see as four distinct advantages to incorporating activities into focus group schedules.

First, activities offer participants alternative ways to respond. Some participants find it challenging to immediately formulate and articulate their thoughts; activities can provide them with the opportunity to reflect and gather their thoughts prior to discussing in a wider group. Discussing such activities, Collucci (2007) argues that they:

...provide a different way of eliciting answers and promoting discussion.

They might be particularly beneficial for those more reflective participants who are less comfortable with immediate verbal responses and need extra time for thinking or prefer to sketch out their ideas. (Collucci, 2007, p. 1424)

In this vein, Winstone, Huntington, Millward, Goldsack & Kyrou (2014) adopted an activity-oriented approach to interviews with autistic young people. Rather than answering direct questions about their self-identity, participants undertook drawing and collage activities to act as a stimulus for discussion. Bokhorst-Heng and Keating Marshall (2019) point out that in the majority of focus group situations, linguistic responses dominate. In many situations, other response modalities, such as creation of visual artefacts, may be more appropriate.

Second, activities can provide prompts and a concrete focus to support discussions, particularly where the topic of interest may involve abstract concepts or ideas. In participatory research, where the views of stakeholders are used to inform approaches to intervention development, groups such as patients, carers, or students may be involved in domains that are often the preserve of 'experts'. In this context, asking participants for their ideas and perspectives without scaffolding is unlikely to be effective. For example, in the context of healthcare research, Lam et al. (2013) used activity-oriented focus groups to gather the views of farm workers regarding barriers to the prevention of heat-related illness. Discussion of symptoms was facilitated by inviting participants to locate symptoms on a map of the body, and ranking tasks were used to facilitate discussion of barriers to prevention. Involving end-users in design processes is also a valued process, yet starting with a blank slate can be difficult for participants if they do not have an idea of the boundaries of what is possible. Winstone, Mathlin, and Nash (2019) and Winstone, Nash, Rowntree, and Parker (2017) used ranking tasks and review of artefacts to facilitate discussion around existing tools that support engagement with feedback, prior to soliciting views and ideas regarding a new set of tools.

Third, activity-oriented focus groups place emphasis on interaction not just in facilitating discussion, but as a crucial element of the analysis. Collucci (2007) writes of focus groups that

...even though this method is widely used and its implementation is widespread across different sectors and disciplines, too often focus groups in fact resemble individual interviews done in group settings.

(p.1423)

Bokhorst-Heng and Keating Marshall (2019) point out that often in focus groups participants respond to the facilitator, rather than to each other, whilst Parker and Tritter (2006) remind us that “in focus groups, interaction is what counts” (p.26) in creating an effective discursive space. The use of activities and exercises can help to promote dialogue among participants (Krueger and Casey, 2014). This may enable students to develop a sense of belonging and coax shy students into participating in the discussion (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Small group-based activities also help to shift attention away from one individual, leading to wider discussion of the ideas generated by the group (Krueger & Casey, 2014).

Fourth, the incorporation of activities can make sessions more enjoyable and emancipatory for participants. Bokhorst-Heng and Keating Marshall (2019) draw upon constructivist theory to argue for the importance of interview contexts as a “collaborative, meaning-making experience” (p. 50). Through the process of participating in activities, participants can themselves develop their own understanding or perceptions. For example, Winstone and Moore (2017) used sentence-completion and ranking tasks to facilitate reflection amongst Graduate Teaching Assistants upon the challenges inherent to their role. Collucci (2007) highlights that activities can make the focus group experience ‘fun’, where

Groups also offer the ideal setting to make participants “do” something and answer questions in a more active way, taking the discussion more in depth and in a potentially more enjoyable way. (p.1424)

The present study

Authors such as Collucci argue for the value of activity-oriented focus groups, where such approaches make it easier for participants to express their views, result in a more balanced participation from all participants, and make sessions more interesting. The aim of this methodological paper is to explore the utility of activity-oriented focus groups in the context of participatory research in higher education as a means of eliciting students' perceptions. This paper draws on data from activity-oriented focus groups conducted as part of the 'Feedback Footprints' project, which had the overarching aim of understanding students' engagement with feedback and working with students to design and create a feedback tool designed to increase students' active engagement with feedback. Using focus group transcripts, artefacts, field notes, and post-session debriefs we evaluate the potential for this approach to facilitate authentic dialogue amongst students and the facilitator regarding the topic of interest. We respond to the call from Darbyshire, MacDougall, and Schiller (2005) to question whether, through this approach, our data offer 'more insight' or just result in 'more data'.

Methods

The focus groups took place at the beginning of the project to: 1) ascertain student's barriers to engaging with their feedback; and 2) determine strategies to help them engage with feedback in the future, including gaining thoughts and feelings regarding a prototype feedback portfolio tool. Ethical approval for the project was obtained and participant consent collected.

First-year undergraduate students were recruited from three faculties (Health and Medical Sciences, Arts and Social Sciences, and Engineering and Physical Sciences). Information about the project was disseminated by programme directors and students were

recruited through convenience sampling. Six focus groups were conducted with a total of 33 participants (see Table 1).

INSERT TABLE 1

All focus groups were conducted on a University campus in a variety of locations across the different faculties. The discussion schedule focused on students' current experiences of receiving feedback via the virtual learning environment (VLE; sometimes called Learning Management System), and their perceptions of interventions and strategies that might support their engagement with feedback. The schedule included semi-structured questioning and activities, as students' spontaneous discussion was still of value. However, the activities were specifically designed to stimulate discussion and sharing of diverse opinions. Each session began with an icebreaker activity designed to build rapport within the group. The remainder of the session included a mixture of directed questions and a series of activities. Each focus group was audio-recorded and smaller group discussions were recorded with separate audio recorders. A research assistant was present to take field notes for each focus group. Field notes were used to capture non-verbal information, including body language and expressions, to provide contextual details to what participants said and how they behaved within the group.

At the end of the session students were asked to provide any additional thoughts and feelings and to share their take home message. The facilitator and research assistant met after each focus group to discuss if the activities were successful in eliciting dialogue between participants and whether the activities functioned as expected. This debrief was audio-recorded and transcribed.

Activities

The focus groups incorporated 3 different activities.

Reflect and share

The purpose of this activity was to provide students with time to think prior to sharing their perceptions. Participants were asked to work in groups of two or three to complete a worksheet consisting of two questions: 1) How do you currently receive your feedback?; and 2) What are likely barriers to your engagement with feedback? Participants were given five minutes to complete the activity before sharing their answers with the group.

Group ranking

This activity was designed to identify differences of opinion, and to extract the complexities of students' views through debate to reach consensus. Participants were provided with a list of 11 resources for supporting students' engagement with feedback (e.g. workshops on how to use and engage with feedback; data on how much you are engaging with your feedback compared to your peers). Participants were asked to discuss the resources amongst themselves to reach a consensus ranking for the resources according to how useful they were perceived to be in supporting engagement with feedback.

Artefact review

Participants were provided with a mock feedback portfolio tool and were asked to review the portfolio tool and record their thoughts regarding their likes, dislikes, and suggestions for improvements using sticky notes. This activity was completed individually followed by a group discussion. The purpose of this activity was to encourage students to share their perspectives candidly through verbal and non-verbal means.

Data analysis

Documents collected during these focus groups were analysed. The analytic process involved scrutinising the data for evidence regarding the impact (both positive and negative) of incorporating activities or exercises into the discussion. The documents reviewed included:

- i. Focus group transcripts
- ii. Facilitator and research assistant debrief transcript
- iii. Research assistant field notes
- iv. Activity artefacts

Documents were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2005). The two researchers reviewed all of the documents independently, noting any initial codes. These initial codes were refined through iteratively discussing their application across all of our data sources, therefore helping to increase the validity of the findings through triangulation. Codes were then grouped into themes. The analysis focused on the outcomes of using activity-oriented questions, not the content of students' discussions, which is discussed elsewhere (reference blinded for review).

Findings

Several themes were identified that cut across the different data sources. The themes reflected the ways in which this approach facilitated greater insight into students' perspectives, not merely 'more data' (Darbyshire et al., 2005). We discuss each of these themes in turn, identifying the additional insight gleaned, whilst also identifying pertinent challenges to activity-oriented formats. Students are represented by pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

Participant as facilitator

As well as encouraging interaction between participants, the activities enabled the students to direct the process of questioning. In all focus groups, students took on the role of facilitator, probing responses from fellow students, as can be seen in the following example:

(Elli): What do you do when you receive your feedback?

(Alana): Erm, I look at the overall feedback really

(Elli): What about... what if the feedback isn't particularly good?

(Alana): I look at the negative feedback more than the positive

(Nicola): I usually click on the notes, but I don't really look at all of them when I have like a long essay, I don't want to read through all of it

(Elli): So you don't read all the notes?

(Nicola): No, just click and just look over, like how many notes are there [FG1]

Across the six focus groups students directed questions at each other 32 times during the reflect and share activity. This behaviour was also seen in the ranking activity. For example, in the debrief session following Focus Group 1, the field assistant and researcher discussed one student “*who asked some really good questions... and asking the right kind of questions which was brilliant*”. In this sense the power relations between researcher and participant were dissipated, with students directing discussion amongst themselves. As such, participants taking on the role of facilitator could lead to greater and more honest dialogue than would occur when questions are asked directly by the researcher. It is of course the case that certain types of students may be more likely than others to take on this role, and the facilitator may need to intervene to ensure that all students are engaged in the discussion.

Confidence to engage in dialogue and share perspectives

In smaller groups, such as in the ranking activity and reflect and share, away from the explicit attention of the facilitator, students felt more confident asking each other questions and expressing opinions as reported in the debrief interaction between the facilitator and research assistant:

(Research Assistant [RA]): Yeah I do think there was quite, the interactive side of it got them speaking, like being able to split off into smaller groups and then feed it back, I think that did get them speaking rather than just saying something and then it going around the room, coz it wasn't really getting as far when they were together.

(Facilitator [Fac]): Yeah. They're much more interested in, or more comfortable talking in small groups or pairs. [FG3 debrief]

This finding is in line with Krueger and Casey (2014) and Bloor (2001) who suggest that one of the key benefits of activities and exercises is the promotion of dialogue between participants. In addition, being part of a small group helped students to develop a feeling of belonging to the group and served to shift attention away from the individual, with ideas being expressed as ideas of the group rather than the individual. This can help some students to feel more confident to engage in dialogue. For example, one participant demonstrated this group ownership of perspectives by prefixing her input with *“And then the girls were saying as well that...”* (Joanna, FG3). Others also referred to the group perspective through sentence openers such as *“We said things like....”* (Alicia, FG3) and *“We sort of agreed that....”* (James, FG6), indicating that they were sharing ownership of the points they were expressing with the small group that they were part of. Krueger & Casey (2014) suggest that the concept

of shared ownership is a significant strength of activity-oriented questions; however, it is important that the nuance of individual perspectives are not lost through this process.

Time to Think

Activities can enable participants to be reflective and provide time to think before responding to questions (Colucci, 2007). In the current study this was clearly seen from the debrief discussion:

(RA): Yeah, when you said, 'any concerns?' they all shook their heads, every single one of them... but then this risk of demotivation came up. [FG1 debrief]

In addition, providing participants with time to think can enable the generation of ideas that they may not have been formulated through direct facilitator questioning. When reviewing a sample portfolio tool, students were asked to record their likes and dislikes about the tool. Students from all focus groups shared their thoughts on alternative options to what was presented to them:

(Jacob): I think the tracking, tracking your progress sheet would be a bit better if you could put the average, some maths data like... what the best person did, what the worst did, to see where you are.

(Polina): Or maybe add what you're missing to get fifty percent in the exam, to kind of tell you like, oh you're missing this much or like you need this. [FG5]

This could also be seen when reviewing the sticky note artefacts used to provide feedback on the portfolio tool:

Example sticky note comments

- *Synchronise with action plan: i.e., set long term goals and be given suggestions on what to improve*
- *Tracking your grades page: Add a line showing your historical average to show performance vs. previous performance [FG4]*

Having the participant visit the same questions twice provided more time to cognitively process the reasons behind specific choices, enabling a more in-depth response.

This was clearly seen in the points raised by Ray in the ranking activity:

Small group discussion:

(Jacob): A facility to collate your feedback into one location

(Francois): That's the best right?

(Ray): Yeah, yeah I think so

(Jacob): I think it's useful. This kind of goes with that. This one here kind of goes with the pull out key pieces, the facility to collate your feedback in a way. I think that's quite useful.

(Ray): Yeah, if you have it all in one place

(Francois): But isn't that what we already have on [the VLE]?

(Ray): No, coz at the moment when you log on you have to go to each thing to see the feedback, but with this you'd be able to see it all together. [FG4]

Collective group discussion:

(Fac): Which one's top?

(Francois): So, facility to collate all your feedback in one location and tools to help you pull out the key messages from multiple pieces of feedback... that's one

(Fac): Okay, so why did you pick this one, the ability to collate everything in one location?

(Ray): They kind of go together if you have like one location where all the feedbacks there and it tells you like recurring themes from your feedback like you always get told that it needs to be more detailed or you always get told that the structure is not correct or you always get told that you should have like read into outside material or something like that, then you can see like if there is a recurring problem. But if you read the feedback individually like once every three months you've got a new feedback and you read it you might not see that you always do the same thing wrong so if you can see it all at once. [FG4]

Detailed and candid responses

Providing participants with activities and time to think about their responses appeared to enhance the quality of the response provided. Group activities like the ranking exercise encourage students to delve into the 'why' behind an opinion and provide an opportunity for them to question each other to gain a deeper understanding of why an individual is thinking in a certain way:

(Francois): Okay, this is very not important, this one [reflecting on feedback]

(Alicia): I think it would be good

(Francois): Really?

(Alicia): Yeah, I think it would make it more um...

(Francois): How do you see that?

(Alicia): I think it would reflect more because if you see that you have zero and then you realise you haven't like reflected and just to like be more aware of how you're looking at the feedback as well as, if you can see that your peers are engaging more you might realise that you should as well be engaging as much. Yeah, I don't know if it would work, but I think it would be interesting.

(Francois): It's complicated, but okay [FG3]

In addition, when asking questions that could evoke critical responses, participants may be reluctant to share their true perspectives. However, providing activities where participants can record their responses on sticky notes privately may help to pull out honest answers which some participants may not feel comfortable sharing in a large group. For example, in one focus group when asked, 'What do you not like about the portfolio?' the students were reluctant to share their thoughts and feelings as demonstrated in the transcript and the debrief notes:

(Fac): I don't know if it's a... a characteristic of students that they're extremely polite

(RA): Yeah, it might just be the whole scenario and sort of like when you're asking for like negatives about the thing, I think people will be reluctant to say just in case like it does come out and then there, they don't exactly want to be the ones that are like putting it down when it could be something that's coming out. [FG3]

However, when reviewing the artefacts students provided a more honest review of the prototype as can be seen from the sticky note feedback provided on the hardcopy sample portfolio:

- *Lots of questions – how it made you feel – irrelevant*
- *Most of it assumes that your course has essay writing in. Not very useful for maths related courses.*
- *Quite long and a little bit repetitive – may not be used [FG3]*

Using this approach, it is not possible to probe further into students' responses, as these artefacts were not reviewed until after the session. However, by using sticky notes, students were able to locate their perspectives clearly against the element of the portfolio to which they were referring.

Dealing with disagreement

Activities enable participants to share their differences of opinion in a structured format to discuss these differences in order to reach a consensus, such as was seen in the ranking activity in the current study. Having to deal with such disagreements can give insight into how and why students perceive certain resources to be more helpful than others, helping to deepen our understanding of student perceptions. As such, it is the dialogue through which consensus is reached that can be particularly enlightening for researchers.

(Elli): I also think data on how much you're engaging with your feedback compared to your peers is very important. For me it would be very motivational because right now I'm not so motivated to apply my feedback

(Fac): Okay, so how do others feel about that?

(Chantal): See I don't like that one, coz I feel like then...

(Alana): It like forces you to compare

(Chantal): Yeah, It also points out who's not doing very well almost

(Elli): But only you can see it. Only you can see the data, the other ones see it but it's anonymous, so they don't see the names of the ones who do worse or better than you.

(Chantal): If it was anonymous, I guess that takes away the issue of, oh, um like so and so's doing better, I'm doing the worst. [FG1]

Participants were able to comfortably share their opposing thoughts and opinions about the use of tracking grades in comparison to others. Due to the nature of the task students had to resolve their differences in order to provide the resources with a position within the rank.

(Edward): I think this is quite good compared to the other one because it's a lot easier to measure how much you're engaging with the specific feedback, it's a very personalized thing, rather than...

(Jacob): Yeah, I agree, I would like to see, it would be good to see like just how much... I mean I'd find that helpful

(Ray): I'm going to go the other way and say I'd find this useless coz I feel like it's too, with feedback, like once I did quite well on the coursework and the feedback was one sentence. I mean how do you engage with that? It's finished, you move on and go to the next coursework. But once I did really bad and got loads of feedback. So what if you do really well on a bunch of assessments,

you've got nothing to engage with and it says your engagements rubbish like everyone else is doing really well.

(Francois): Well unless it's mathematics and science when it's like one hundred percent accurate, like it's numerical, there is always aspects for improvement in essays so even though you have eighty or ninety in an essay which is kind of ridiculous, but if you do get it you still have ten percent more to improve so getting a high mark doesn't mean that you are going to get one sentence.

(Ray): Half my modules are maths so... [FG4]

Maintaining focus

Activity-oriented questions can be particularly helpful amongst young adults as it breaks up a session, switching focus away from continuously directly questions (Colucci, 2007). This allows for focus to be maintained during discussions as is apparent from the field notes and debrief transcript from one focus group.

During the activities the field assistant noted that the small group was *"led by P4 – others agree. P4 talking about giving individual feedback rather than ticking random boxes.... P4 making notes on worksheet"*. However, field notes from the whole group discussion reveal P4 losing focus *'P4 yawns inwardly and folds arms'* and later on in the discussion regarding learning analytics *'P4 looks at her lap, start fidgeting and touching her hair, nose'*. In the debrief, the research assistant discussed that this participant *"was quite often looking and staring into space and not noticeably conscious of listening to other people"* [FG5]. As such, it appears that this participant was more engaged in the activities than in the whole group discussion.

Exploring different perspectives

Conducting a focus group and incorporating activities encourages participants to ask their partners questions to find out more about them. This can lead to greater understanding of the perspective of others. For example, when discussing feedback during the worksheet activity two participants had the following dialogue:

(Oliver): Mine's numerical, just calculations so mine are almost always errors in method

(Grace): What subject do you do?

(Oliver): Aerospace

(Grace): Yeah, that's quite different from mine because I'm sociology so it's all kind of, I get like comments on my essays and I kind of try and write down and think about what I'm gonna try and do. But I don't feel like I really, I like to write it down but I'm kind bad at, like I don't really go back over it.

(Oliver): Yeah, I guess ours is kind of so different [FG2]

Students were aware that others may have a different perspectives from themselves and they acknowledged these differences in their responses:

(Jacob): I agree that not everyone works at the library, you can work at home, so it's not, it may not be linked but for some other, the grades you get, it may be useful. Like this average top ten percent and stuff for each assignment I think is pretty good.

(Rav): I have sort of mixed feelings. I think it does have its down sides like just because you go to the library doesn't mean you're doing better than someone that doesn't go to the library but at the same time I think if you showed someone

this data it might sort of motivate and sort of like provide discipline so they can probably actually do better, but I think it, some people may find it useful while others might not so it's sort of one of those things I think. [FG4]

The data reveal that activity-oriented focus groups can provide a useful 'discursive space' (Seale et al., 2015, p. 31) in which students can surface and explore different perspectives.

Discussion

In contemporary higher education, aspiring to engage students as partners, and surfacing and responding to multiple student voices, are more important than ever. As a result, it is important that research seeking to understand students' perspectives and experiences enables students to express their views in meaningful ways. Cutting across the analysis of focus group transcripts, activity artefacts, field notes, and session debrief transcripts, the data presented in this paper reveal ways in which the use of activity-oriented focus groups provide 'more insight' into students' perceptions (Darbyshire et al., 2005).

Affordances of activity-oriented questioning

The 'student voice' is often portrayed as representing the consensual views of cohorts of students; however, this singular voice misses many of the nuances of multiple student perspectives (Lygo-Baker et al., 2019). Our data indicate that more insight into students' views can be gleaned from activity-oriented focus groups, by representing diverse voices rather than a singular voice. The data analysed in this study indicate that students were more comfortable engaging in discussion in response to activity-oriented questions than direct questions. The perspectives of these students may be less likely to be surfaced in a traditional

didactic questioning format. An important part of surfacing multiple voices is ensuring that focus groups contain dialogue between participants, not merely “individual interviews done in group settings” (Colucci, 2007, p.1423). In particular, our data demonstrate that through participation in activities, participants themselves take on the role of facilitator, directing prompting questions to each other to clarify and develop meaning. The excerpts we have presented are good examples of what Mercer (2004) terms ‘exploratory talk’, where “partners engage critically but constructively with each other’s ideas”. This stands in contrast to ‘cumulative talk’, where “speakers build positively but uncritically on what the others have said” (Mercer, 2004, p. 146). Mercer argues that exploratory talk is characterised by active participation and shared decision-making with the effect that reasoning processes are made more visible to researchers.

This visibility is important in situations where the interaction surrounding disagreement can provide deeper insight than different perspectives in isolation. Activities involving ranking or reaching a group consensus are valuable for this purpose. Whilst traditional questioning might surface different perspectives held by a group, it may not necessarily reveal what participants *don't* think, and *why* they hold perspectives that differ from others. Using activities to surface ‘conversational incongruence’ (Browne, 2016, p. 203) ensures that disagreements are focused on the task not on individuals, making the process less personal and more concrete. This is exemplified in our data by the use of language such as ‘we’ and ‘us’ representing shared ownership of ideas and perspectives.

Surfacing differences of opinion is also important for the participants themselves. In line with a constructivist approach (e.g. Bokhorst-Heng & Keating Marshall, 2019), listening to and responding to different perspectives can serve as a transformative learning experience for participants. Whilst perspective-taking could emerge from didactic questioning, the shared focus of the activities can make this more concrete, enabling students to see *why* the

perspectives and experiences of other students may be different to their own. Our data demonstrate how the discussion emanating from participation in the activities provides a valuable discursive space where participants have the opportunity to explore how and why their own perspectives and experiences may differ to those of others.

In traditional focus group settings, hierarchical relationships can inhibit participants' true and candid perspectives due to social desirability effects (Hollander, 2004). Hollander (2004) argues that both 'problematic silences' (where participants withhold their participation in discourse) and 'problematic speech' (e.g. where participants convey the responses they think the researcher wants to hear, or choose to express what they perceive to be consensual perspectives) can prevent candid responses. These effects can be overcome by inviting students to express themselves in alternative ways that overcome these social contextual effects inherent to focus group discussions. For example, by inviting students to write their thoughts on a mock-up of the portfolio tool, they gave very honest responses.

In the context of higher education research, providing students with opportunities to contribute to research and development work that relates to their experience and their education is high on many institutional agendas. Our analysis indicates that activity-oriented focus groups have potential to provide a space where students feel comfortable expressing their true perspectives, and where hierarchical relationships between researcher and participants are dissipated by students taking on role of facilitator, questioning each other, and drawing out further responses from peers. We believe, on the basis of these analyses, that activity-oriented focus groups do provide 'more insight' rather than just 'more data' (Darbyshire et al., 2005). In many ways, activity-oriented formats have the potential to open up a broader 'discursive space' (Seale et al., 2015, p. 31) in which to surface the candid perspectives of students. In this sense, our findings mirror those of Bokhorst-Heng and Keating Marshall (2019) in their use of activity-oriented questions:

Through some of our activities, we were able to break through the didactics of conversation, eliciting nuances that might not have emerged through dyadic researcher/participant interview questions. Importantly, we were able to fully engage participants in the process of eliciting their perspectives (p.158)

In Table 2, we summarise what we see as the specific affordances of different forms of activity-oriented questions, according to researchers' aims.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Learning Points and Recommendations

In a discussion of the use of focus groups in the field of human geography, Hopkins (2007) calls for researchers to adopt a more critical approach to the use of this method. In particular, Hopkins suggests that researchers consider the multiple influences on focus group discussion, such as the nature of participants and the positionality of the researcher. Activity-oriented discussion methods are not without their limitations and may not be appropriate in all student engagement situations. Whilst activities have the potential to involve participants in more meaningful discussion, the approach does not necessarily overcome commonly-reported issues of individuals dominating discussion. However, this issue does appear to 'self-correct' where students themselves act as facilitators and guide discussion between their peers. It is also important to note that activities do not replace 'free' discussion between participants, as would be present in more traditional focus group schedules. As argued by Colucci:

...exercises are meant to be the input for further discussion, and they accomplish their role best if the facilitator goes further than the fulfilment of the task and invites participants to describe their answers more in depth, provide more detail, apply them to a real situation, and express agreement or disagreement with the participants' answers. (Colucci, 2007, p.1430)

There is no 'correct' balance between didactic questioning and activity-oriented questioning. Some focus groups might involve didactic questioning supplemented by a single activity; others may consist entirely of activities. Activities should not merely be incorporated because they are enjoyable; whilst that is often the case (Colucci, 2007), we recommend that researchers consider the specific affordance of activities in their particular context (see Table 2). The number of activities utilised will depend on the length of the session (longer sessions lend themselves to more activities in order to help maintain attention), the age of the participants (older participants may require fewer activities and more opportunity to discuss the outcomes of selected activities) and the participants' proficiency in expressing ideas verbally (if you feel that participants are not able to share thoughts and feelings verbally delve into activities as soon as possible).

Whilst the use of some activities can enable students to feel more comfortable expressing critical views, this does not mean that the role of the facilitator is diminished in this regard. Selection of the right facilitator remains key to the success of focus groups. The facilitator must feel confident and comfortable managing focus group participants; similarly, the participants must feel comfortable with the facilitator. If asking students to provide feedback on a product or design, it is crucial that the facilitator is not closely associated with the product or design to encourage honest dialogue.

Whilst focus groups often consist of group-level discussion, activities that involve breaking out into smaller groups can be particularly beneficial. Smaller groups are often perceived as less intimidating and can encourage quieter individuals to share their thoughts and feelings with their peers. Key points of discussion can often be relayed to the whole group by more confident individuals if required or in some cases the sense of belonging that can come from a small group can enable quieter individuals to be more vocal when sharing with the whole group.

Conclusion

This article provides an overview of the affordances of utilising activities within focus groups discussions in higher education. The use of activities can promote dynamic group discussion and elicit more thoughtful responses while helping students feel at ease. This article demonstrates that activities provide time for students to think, question the opinions of others, and reflect and resolve conflict. Small group activities help quieter voices to become vocal and increase the chance of honest participant responses.

Understanding students' perspectives and enabling students' voices to contribute meaningfully to the work of Universities does not necessarily require the collation of increasing amounts of data. Instead, the key consideration is the extent to which the data collected provide meaningful insight into students' experiences, and afford them the opportunity to contribute to research, policy, practice, and governance. The discursive space created through the use of activity-oriented questions may provide the environment in which such insight can be gleaned.

Declaration of interest: There are no conflicts of interest

References

Bloor, M. (Ed.). (2001). *Focus groups in social research*. London: Sage.

- Bokhorst-Heng, W., & Marshall, K. K. (2019). Informing research (practices) through pedagogical theory: focus groups with adolescents. *International Journal of Research and Method in Education*, 42(2), 148-162.
- Browne, A. L. (2016). Can people talk together about their practices? Focus groups, humour and the sensitive dynamics of everyday life. *Area*, 48(2), 198-205.
- Colucci, E. (2007). "Focus groups can be fun": The use of activity-oriented questions in focus group discussions. *Qualitative Health Research*, 17(10), 1422-1433.
- Darbyshire, P., MacDougall, C., & Schiller, W. (2005). Multiple methods in qualitative research with children: more insight or just more? *Qualitative Research*, 5(4), 417-436.
- Fielding, M. (2011). Patterns of partnership: Student voice, intergenerational learning and democratic fellowship. In N. Mockler & J. Sachs (Eds.), *Rethinking educational practice through reflexive inquiry* (pp. 61-75). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Freeman, R. (2016). Is student voice necessarily empowering? Problematising student voice as a form of higher education governance. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 35(4), 859-862.
- Gibbs, A. (1997). Focus groups. *Social Research Update*, 19(8), 1-8.
- Groundwater-Smith, S., & Mockler, N. (2016). From data source to co-researchers? Tracing the shift from 'student voice' to student-teacher partnerships in educational action research. *Educational Action Research*, 24(2), 159-176.
- Hollander, J. A. (2004). The social contexts of focus groups. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 33(5), 602-637.
- Hopkins, P. E. (2007). Thinking critically and creatively about focus groups. *Area*, 39(4), 528-535.
- Kevern, J., & Webb, C. (2001). Focus groups as a tool for critical social research in nurse education. *Nurse Education Today*, 21(4), 323-333.

- Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M.A. (2014). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (5th ed.). Singapore: Sage.
- Lam, M., Krenz, J., Palmández, P., Negrete, M., Perla, M., Murphy-Robinson, H., & Spector, J. T. (2013). Identification of barriers to the prevention and treatment of heat-related illness in Latino farmworkers using activity-oriented, participatory rural appraisal focus group methods. *BMC Public Health*, *13*(1), 1004-1016.
- Lea, S. J., Stephenson, D. & Troy, J. (2010). Higher education students' attitudes to student-centred learning: Beyond 'educational bulimia'? *Studies in Higher Education*, *28*(3), 321-334.
- Leedy, P. D., & Ormrod, J. E. (2010). *Practical research* (9th ed.). Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Lygo-Baker, S., Kinchin, I.M., & Winstone, N.E. (forthcoming, 2019). The single voice fallacy. In S. Lygo-Baker, I.M. Kinchin, and N. E. Winstone (Eds.), *Engaging student voices in higher education: Diverse perspectives and expectations in partnership*. London: Palgrave.
- Mercer, N. (2007). Sociocultural discourse analysis: Analysing classroom talk as a social mode of thinking. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice*, *1*(2), 137-168.
- Merton, R. K., & Kendall, P. L. (1946). The focused interview. *American Journal of Sociology*, *51*(6), 541-557.
- Mockler, N., & Groundwater-Smith, S. (2015). *Engaging with student voice in research, education and community: Beyond legitimation and guardianship*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Morgan, D. L. (1997). *The focus group guidebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Moule, P., Ward, R. & Lockyer, L. (2010). Nursing and healthcare students' experiences and use of e-learning in higher education. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *66*(12), 2785-2795.

- Parker, A., & Tritter, J. (2006). Focus group method and methodology: current practice and recent debate. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 29(1), 23-37.
- Parmenter, J. (2007). What happened when I stopped viewing my students as data points. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/10/11/teacher-what-happened-when-i-stopped-viewing-my-students-as-data-points/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.5b3630addbf0
- Seale, J. (2010). Doing student voice work in higher education: an exploration of the value of participatory methods. *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(6), 995-1015.
- Seale, J., Gibson, S., Haynes, J., & Potter, A. (2015). Power and resistance: Reflections on the rhetoric and reality of using participatory methods to promote student voice and engagement in higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 39(4), 534-552.
- Smith, C. (2017). Mind the gap! Students' expectations and early experiences of higher education. *Innovations in Practice*, 11(1), 23-38.
- Stewart, D. W., & Shamdasani, P. N. (2015). *Focus groups: Theory and practice* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Trahar, S. & Hyland, F. (2011). Experiences and perceptions of internationalisation in higher education in the UK. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 30(5), 623-633.
- Warr, D. (2005). 'It was fun. But we don't usually talk about these things': analyzing sociable interaction in focus groups. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 11(2), 200-25.
- Winstone, N. E., Mathlin, G., & Nash, R. A. (2019). Building feedback literacy: Students' perceptions of the Developing Engagement with Feedback Toolkit. *Frontiers in Education*, 4(39).

Winstone, N., Millward, L., Huntington, C., Goldsack, L., & Kyrou, E. (2014). Eliciting rich dialogue through the use of activity-oriented interviews with autistic young people.

Childhood, 21(2), 190-206.

Winstone, N., & Moore, D. (2017). Sometimes fish, sometimes fowl? Liminality, identity work and identity malleability in Graduate Teaching Assistants. *Innovations in*

Education and Teaching International, 54(5), 494-502.

Winstone, N., Nash, R., Rowntree, J., & Parker, M. (2017). "It'd be useful, but I wouldn't use it". Barriers to University students' feedback seeking and recipience. *Studies in*

Higher Education, 42(11), 2026-2041.

Table 1. Participant details

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6
Length (minutes)	60	60	62	59	56	68
Group Size	6	5	5	6	5	6
Sex (F:M)	4:2	2:3	3:2	1:5	4:1	4:2
Participant disciplines	HMS: 2 ASS: 4	HMS: 1 ASS: 2 EPS: 2	HMS: 2 ASS: 2 EPS: 1	ASS: 4 EPS: 2	HMS: 1 ASS: 3 EPS: 1	HMS: 4 ASS: 2

HMS = Health/Medical Sciences; ASS = Arts/Social Sciences; EPS = Engineering/Physical Sciences

Table 2. Affordances of activity-oriented question formats in focus group discussions

Aim	Suggested activities
Prevent individual students from dominating discussion	Provide time to think, perhaps noting down own ideas before group discussion
Surface students' true perceptions whilst avoiding social desirability effects	Reviewing artefacts. Discussion or adding sticky notes
Understand in detail differences in students' opinions	Group ranking task
Gain a sense of consensus from students	Sentence completion tasks