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Appleton, L. orcid.org/0000-0003-3564-3447 and Hall, H. (2022) Using a multi-location, longitudinal focus group method to conduct qualitative research into the role of public libraries. *Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries*, 11 (1). pp. 83-92.

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Using a multi-location, longitudinal focus group method to conduct qualitative research into the role of public libraries

Dr. Leo Appleton¹, Dr. Hazel Hall²

¹Senior University Teacher, Information School, University of Sheffield, UK

²Professor of Social Informatics, School of Computing, Edinburgh Napier University, UK

Abstract

A novel multi-location longitudinal focus group method was deployed as part of a doctoral study on the role of UK public libraries. This work was completed part-time at Edinburgh Napier University between 2013 and 2020. Over a period of three years, fifty-three participants took part in three rounds of focus group meetings in eight public library authorities in England and Scotland. The collection of data in this manner offered several advantages for the assembly of a rich data set for qualitative analysis. In particular, the revisiting of project themes on three occasions supported an increase in the level of sophistication and depth of discussion amongst the study participants. The main drawback of the approach was participant attrition.

Keywords

focus group, longitudinal, multi-location, public libraries, qualitative, UK

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present details of a multi-location longitudinal focus group method that was deployed in a project on public libraries as a facet of the information society. This approach was developed and implemented in a part-time doctoral study undertaken at Edinburgh Napier University between 2013 and 2020.

At the outset of the study, it was recognized that it was important to select methods that would enable dialogue with library users about their relationship with the public library service. Taking into account research traditions in the field, several qualitative methods were considered for data collection prior to the adoption of a focus group approach. It was possible to implement the focus groups in a longitudinal manner due to the part-time nature of the doctoral study that was completed over a period of seven years in total.

The account below is first concerned with the design and implementation of three rounds of focus groups at eight different public library locations in England and Scotland. These took place in the middle of the PhD registration period between 2015 and 2018. In all instances, the purpose was to collect data to address three main research questions on: (1) the extent to which an individual's position is advantaged as a result of using public libraries; (2) the impact of public library usage on individual and community citizenship; and (3) the role of the public library in the 21st century.

An evaluation of this novel methodological approach is then presented as the main contribution of the work as reported in this paper. Here it is made evident that the multi-location longitudinal focus group method is valuable as a means of collecting high quality data sets to underpin theory development in a doctoral study.

2. Selection of multi-location, longitudinal focus groups for this study

Prior research on public libraries in the UK has predominantly used quantitative measures to demonstrate return on investment or value for money. For example, McMenemy (2009) argues that the measurement of outputs and economic impact should provide evidence of public library value, and Halpin et al (2015, p. 31) use statistics to demonstrate value from tangible assets. Similarly, usage figures such as the number of active users, loans, and loans per user, can demonstrate the extent to which services and resources offered by public libraries are beneficial to their users (e.g., Peachey, 2017).

However, usage is not synonymous with value, and it would be unwise to measure public library service value purely in economic terms. An alternative is to assess the societal value of public libraries. In recent years academic researchers have advocated, and adopted, this approach with reference to outcome measures (e.g., Huysmans & Oomes, 2013; Vakkari & Serola, 2012;

Vakkari et al, 2014; Vakkari et al, 2016). Such studies lend themselves to the collection of qualitative data, or deploy mixed methods (e.g., McCahill, Birdi & Jones, 2020). These include, for example, Delphi methods, focus groups, observation, and surveying by questionnaire and interview.

The aim of the study discussed here was to explore three themes related to the value of public libraries through the eyes of public library users: (1) individual advantage accrued through public library use; (2) the impact of public library usage on individual and community citizenship; and, more broadly, (3) the role of the public library in the 21st century. This required an approach that allowed for the discussion of, and reflection on, shared experiences amongst members of the community who avail themselves of public library services. It thus necessitated the collection of qualitative data. The focus group method was deemed appropriate for its main ‘ingredients’ of (1) people who (2) possess certain characteristics, and (3) provide qualitative data (4) in a focused discussion (5) to help understand the topic of interest (Krueger and Casey, 2009, p. 6).

In order to fully realise the research objectives and answer the research questions, it was felt that focus group participants would need the opportunity to engage in reflective discussion around sophisticated topics (e.g. information society, social capital exchange, etc.). There was a risk that such discussion would not manifest itself during a single focus group where participants, unfamiliar with one another, were brought together for the first and only time. Therefore, a longitudinal approach was explored in which focus group participants would be reconvened at regular intervals during the data collection period. Through reconvening groups, it was possible to create a familiar environment, in which participants already knew each other. This allowed participants to feel more comfortable with the environment and for the focus group facilitator to introduce new and increasingly more sophisticated topics within the research themes. It also allowed, in phases 2 and 3, for participants to be asked to reflect on their library usage since the previous meeting of the focus group, therefore inviting them to reflect and build on previous discussions. The part-time nature of the PhD provided a unique opportunity to implement multi-location focus groups within a library and information science research project in a *longitudinal* manner.

3. Implementation of multi-location, longitudinal focus groups for this study

3.1 Pilot study: Liverpool, 2014

Prior to the wholesale adoption of focus groups for data collection for this study, a pilot focus group was convened in September 2014. This was to test the focus group method and assess its appropriateness for investigating the specific research questions. The site for data collection was Liverpool’s public library service.

The call for focus group members for the pilot study was advertised by posters in and around Liverpool's central and branch libraries, and publicity information was also included on the council web pages. The goal was to recruit between 6 and 10 participants, as per good practice recommended by Krueger and Casey(2009, p. 68). The recruitment campaign invited library users to 'come and share [their] experiences of using Liverpool City Libraries'. An incentive of a £10 Amazon voucher was offered in exchange for participation. This approach made use of naturalistic sampling in that it was both a convenience sample and a judgement sample. Recruitment was targeted at active library users who already habitually took advantage of Liverpool public library services. This ensured that those in the sample would be in a position to participate in discussions to address the three themes of the study, as articulated above.

Eight people signed up for the pilot focus group in Liverpool. This was considered an appropriate and workable number, particularly for a pilot. The participant demographics as summarised in Table 1, show representation of different types users.

	Age	Gender	Occupation	Nationality
Participant 1	45 - 54	F	Lecturer	Indian / British
Participant 2	75 - 84	M	Retired professor	Indian
Participant 3	65 - 74	F	Retired mental health worker	British
Participant 4	16 - 24	M	College student	British
Participant 5	55 - 64	M	Retired	German
Participant 6	35 - 44	M	Photographer	Venezuelan
Participant 7	55 - 64	F	Retired	British
Participant 8	55 - 64	F	Social worker	British

Table 1: Pilot focus group participants

Four stages of focus group discussion have been identified (Foulkes, 1964). Time and consideration for each stage can optimise the value of data outputs from focus groups. *Social integration* is the first stage. Here the opportunity is offered to all members of the group for equal participation within the discussion. The second stage is *mirror reaction*. This allows for the group members' realisation of shared values, anxieties and experiences of the topic of discussion. *Condenser phenomenon* follows as the third stage, in which participants talk freely about issues raised. In the fourth and final **stage**, labelled *exchange*, they share key information as the main part of a focus group discussion (Fern, 2001). Care was taken when facilitating the pilot focus group to ensure that the group members passed through these four stages while addressing the key questions for discussion, as summarised in Table 2.

Theme	Questions
Feelings and attitudes towards the public library	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your feelings towards the public library (i.e., how do you feel when you are making use of the library?) • What would you say your attitude was towards the public library?
Library users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who do you think libraries are for, and why? • What do you think libraries contribute to society? • What would happen if there were no libraries? • What do you think about the future of information?
Citizenship and public libraries (To encourage discussion about different uses of libraries, particularly from a societal and community perspective)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think is meant by the term citizenship? • How do you think your citizenship is affected by using the library? • Have you been able to do anything different as a result of using the library?

Table 2: Pilot focus group themes and questions

Analysis of the transcript of the recording of the pilot focus group discussion confirmed that the line of questioning was effective in generating data required for the study. The data gathered could later be analysed with reference to extant knowledge in the field (as established through an earlier literature review). In addition, several other positive features of the approach were observed:

- There was a sense of a safe environment that encouraged proactive discussion
- Anecdotal evidence was captured, and then, validated when participants reflected on one another's observations
- All participants were able to contribute to the discussion

Tight facilitation mitigated against a number of known potential weaknesses of the approach. This included the risk of domination of discussion by one or two individuals, hijacking of the session as a feedback platform on public library services, and insufficient time to cover all the questions due to too much attention devoted to issues of marginal relevance to the study. In addition, care was taken to ensure that the discourse of the discussion was pitched at a general level, rather than deploying technical vocabulary. For example, most public library users do not speak about their role in the exchange of social and transactional capital (even though the analysis of focus group discussion data at this stage of the study showed that they regularly engaged in this activity). Similarly, unfamiliar terms such as 'information society' were not used with the focus group participants on this occasion.

4.2 Main study: eight locations, 2015-2018

Empirical data were collected for this research over three years, from 2015 to 2018. The longitudinal approach of the research strategy meant that the main data collection exercise was implemented in three distinct phases: phase 1 (2015-2016); phase 2 (2016-2017); phase 3 (2017-18).

4.2.1 Phase 1(2015-16)

Approximately 40 public library authorities were approached in order to obtain a representative sample of UK public library users in different types of library administration: county councils, city councils, urban and rural areas. Eight local authorities were selected as the sample for recruiting participants and are listed in Table 3.

Library authority	Type of authority
Liverpool	City council authority
Newcastle-upon-Tyne	City council authority
Edinburgh	City council authority
Lincolnshire	County council authority
Essex	County council authority
Devon	County council authority
Redbridge (London Borough)	Metropolitan borough council authority
Sutton (London Borough)	Metropolitan borough council authority

Table 3: List of participating local authorities

The recruitment method used for the pilot study was replicated for recruiting participants to the subsequent phase one focus groups. Therefore convenience samples of up to ten library users in each authority were assembled through a print and online publicity campaign, with Amazon vouchers as incentives to take part. This resulted in a total of 53 participants for the Phase 1 focus groups. The full sample exhibited a wide diversity in terms of age (ranging from 16 to 84), gender, ethnicity (e.g., Afro-Caribbean, Asian and white participants), level of education (from no formal qualifications to PhD level), nationality (including British, German, Indian, Irish, Polish, Venezuelan, and Zimbabwean), and socio-economic status (from the unemployed to retired professors). A summary of the numbers of focus group participants is provided in Table 4.

Focus group	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Devon	7	4	2
Edinburgh	10	7	4
Essex	2	2	2
Lincolnshire	4	3	2
Liverpool	8	4	4
Newcastle-upon-Tyne	4	4	3
Redbridge (London Borough)	9	3	5
Sutton (London Borough)	9	5	6
Total	53	32	28

Table 4: Numbers of participants by local authority and by phase

Following practice tested in the pilot, the process and objectives of each focus group were related to the participants at the start of each meeting. The need to collect personal details for the later analysis was also explained, and assurance was given that all participants would be anonymous in reports of the study's findings. An informed consent form was then distributed and read aloud to the participants. The anticipated longitudinal nature of the study was highlighted at the Phase 1 meetings so that the participants were aware that there was an expectation of reconvening the focus group at later stages of the study. The informed consent form also included an opt-in section for those participants happy to be photographed and contribute to the assembly of illustrative material that could be used in later reports of the study's findings.

The Phase 1 focus groups were each scheduled for an hour. In this time, the participants discussed a set of themes that was adapted from those tested in the pilot study:

- Attitudes and feelings towards public libraries
- The demand for and use of knowledge and information
- Library users
- Citizenship and public libraries

A key attribute of the focus group members was that they had in common lived experiences of public libraries. They were therefore willing to share their public library stories with others in their focus groups. Despite disagreement on some topics (e.g., noise, children's spaces in libraries, technology versus print), the participants respected one another's opinions, and all appeared to enjoy the experience of the group discussion. As was the case with the pilot study, the interactions of all the focus groups followed the stages of group formation as identified above by Foulkes (1964) and Fern (2001).

4.2.2 Phase 2 (2016-2017)

The Phase 2 focus group meetings lasted one hour and took place in the same locations as Phase 1 and included 32 of the original 53 participants (no substitutions were made). This time participants were asked to discuss and reflect on their personal development and involvement in their communities in the intervening period since the last focus group meetings, and to consider whether any of this had been facilitated through their public library use. The intention here was to prompt reflection on individual and community learning and development supported by public library services.

The participants soon became comfortable with one another when they convened for a second time, speaking about the issues under consideration and sharing their experiences with ease. This allowed for intense and informative discussions of self and community development. Some of the anecdotes related at the Phase 1 focus groups from up to a year before were revisited. For

example, at Liverpool, stories related in Phase 1 about the discovery of reading, through the encouragement of librarians, resurfaced at the Phase 2 meeting. This reflected shared history of interactions within the groups, and familiarity with the context of one another's public library use.

4.2.3 Phase 3 (2017-2018)

The third and final round of focus groups took place up to two years after the first meetings. The 28 participants who returned to take part in the study were immediately familiar and comfortable with one another, the facilitator, and the focus group environment. Some new parameters and stimuli were introduced to the focus groups in anticipation of this quick re-emergence of the group dynamic. These included more abstract and sophisticated themes to discuss over extended two-hour meetings (i.e., twice as long as the earlier focus groups).

At the start of the Phase 3 focus groups, crib sheets were distributed to the focus group members. These provided definitions for all the new concepts to be discussed for the first time in the groups, alongside further consideration of the theme of citizenship. The new terms were: social capital; human capital; knowledge capital; and the information society. The participants were first asked to discuss these concepts in pairs and threes, relating them to their own personal public library use. After 30–40 minutes of small group discussion, the participants reconvened in the larger group to share their stories and experiences of relevance to the concepts listed.

4. Evaluation of multi-location, longitudinal focus groups for this study

There are several benefits of collecting research data for a study such as this in the way described above. The main one is that it allows time for participant reflection on lived experiences that deepens between meetings. This was evident in all eight Phase 2 focus groups. Here, the discussion was more open, deeper, and generated more plentiful and richer personal anecdotes than was the case in Phase 1. In Phase 3, the participants' obvious comfort with the focus group setting and their desire to engage for a third time was even stronger. By this point, the participants came to the focus groups as enthusiasts keen to engage in the research process through active contributions to the discussions, rather than as mere attendees. In some instances, they likened the Phase 3 focus groups as reunions with the opportunity to meet up with old friends. For example, the Sutton participants spoke of their enjoyment of contributing to the study over the three-year period, and noted that it felt like meeting with familiar like-minds whenever they engaged in the discussions.

This method also allowed for more topics to be discussed than would normally be the case in a set of focus groups that only brings participants together on one occasion. It also afforded the opportunity to increase the sophistication of the

discussions, thus supporting the collection of data of value to later theory development in a doctoral study.

The revisiting of common themes from one phase to the next provided an opportunity for the participants to check credibility and dependability of the content of their discussions. This also contributed to these elements of the study's findings as a whole. These aspects were particularly interesting in a period during which external political developments were exerting an impact on public library service delivery. For example, the Liverpool and Lincolnshire participants exhibited awareness of the financial cuts to their local library services, and in Newcastle the move to community volunteer-led branch libraries was raised as a live issue. These developments had consequences for the library experiences of the participants and, in some cases, brought about better informed and/or changes in opinion at the later focus group meetings.

The main drawback of this approach to data collection is participant attrition and project sustainability (see Table 4). In this case, these risks were mitigated through careful planning and communication to ensure that there was a critical mass of participants across the study as a whole to see it through to completion.

Conclusion

The main contribution of this work is the assessment of a novel approach to assess the role and value of public libraries. It has been demonstrated that a multi-location longitudinal focus group method can be valuable for data collection in this type of library and information science research, and may be transferable to other research endeavours in the domain. In particular, reconvening the same focus group participants three times over a period of three years allows for development of the quality of participant discussions that, in turn, generates a rich data set for qualitative analysis. The main drawback of this approach, however, is participant attrition.

A second paper to be generated from the completed doctoral study is currently (March 2022) under review with the expectation of publication in the second half of 2022. This further output will add to the account reported here by relating the theoretical contributions of the study, as drawn from the analysis of focus group data generated from the approach described above. These are concerned with the significance of public library services as part of the public sphere in three defined roles: (1) epistemic; (2) community; and (3) political.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the focus group participants for their enthusiastic contributions to this study. They also acknowledge their former Edinburgh Napier University colleagues Dr Robert Raeside and Dr Alistair Duff, who co-supervised the PhD alongside Dr Hazel Hall as Director of Studies.

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