

Focus group sessions – in depth understanding of users

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In the autumn 2011, Åbo Akademi University Library conducted a focus group study among students. The main purpose was to find out what our patrons think of the Library's services and how the Library should develop them to meet the needs of patrons. Service improvements were made as a result of the focus group study, but the study also opened views generally on the users' experiences and expectations.

The focus group method

One big challenge for university libraries nowadays is to involve their patrons in the development of their services. Åbo Akademi University Library decided to embark on a new way of assessing the needs of our patrons, namely the focus group method.

The focus group method is a form of qualitative research in which a group of people are asked about their opinions and attitudes towards, for instance, a service. Since the 1980s, the method has been popular within social sciences and has increasingly been used by libraries.

During focus group sessions the participants can freely discuss certain themes or questions, which are presented by the moderator for the session. The aim is to get as many opinions as possible on a certain activity or topic. One of the advantages of focus group sessions is the interaction and cooperation between the participants. This can never be achieved by individual interviews or surveys.

Preparing the study

A working group, consisting of six librarians within Åbo Akademi University Library, was set out to plan and implement the focus group study. The working group completed a questionnaire for the focus group sessions. The main issues were following: where patrons search for information, whom they turn to when having problems in information retrieval, how they have acquired their search methods, what they think about the Library's resources and services, and what function the Library has in their lives as students.

Seventeen students, representing all divisions of the University, finally participated in three 2-hour focus group sessions. Each

group consisted of 5–6 student participants in addition to three library representatives. One of the library representatives acted as a moderator, one as a secretary and one as a listener.

To recruit participants to the focus group sessions the Library posted invitation flyers in reading rooms in the main and campus libraries and on notice boards and lunch restaurants on the campus. The flyer was also distributed by e-mail to all students at the University as well as posted on the Library's blog, <http://blogs.abo.fi/biblioteket/>, and Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/Akademibiblioteket>.

The sessions were held in the relaxing atmosphere at the University cafeteria. The sessions were opened with a short presentation of the aim of the study, along with some refreshments and snacks. After the presentation of the participants, the moderator started posing questions in the prepared questionnaire. After completing the sessions the participants received a cinema ticket as thanks.

“Just in time” support desired

Surprisingly enough participants in all three sessions agreed on most issues. The Library as a physical environment was considered very important. Several participants considered the Library their “workplace” and “a social meeting place”. The facilities received much appreciation, especially reading rooms and group study rooms.

The Library's materials and resources were appreciated but the problem of finding what one needed was considered difficult. More guides for using databases were requested as well as more instruction in information retrieval at the right point of time, i.e. when the students write essays, papers or Master's theses.

It was disappointing to hear that students rarely turn to librarians when in need of help with information retrieval. It seems to be much easier to turn to a fellow student or a teacher. On the other hand, the Library received positive feedback for instance its presence in social media.

Closer to users

The library representatives felt that they got closer to their patrons and experienced a genuine understanding of what the patrons need and consider important. Also, participants expressed genuine approval of the sessions and said they learned new things about Library. Some of the participants became friends with the Library on Facebook and made comments on our blog.

The results of the study were presented to the whole library staff. In addition, the results have also been posted on the Library's social media platforms and on the webpage, of Åbo Akademi University so that students and staff would be aware of the findings.

The focus group method proved to be a very rewarding and interesting method. As a qualitative study, it complements previous quantitative studies. The method also proved to be an effective marketing tool for the Library. As a result of the focus group study, the Library has already taken measures to improve some of the issues among the findings. E.g. the Library's information retrieval courses have been marketed more intensively. The Library is also planning a “Book a librarian” service and preparing more guides for the use of library databases. 📖

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