

Using focus groups to add value to evaluation of Student Learning programmes

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Student Learning Te Taiako

Overview

- Evaluation
- Evaluation at Student Learning Te Taiako
- Using a focus group to enhance evaluation of a Student Learning programme - some notes
- Your thoughts

Why evaluation

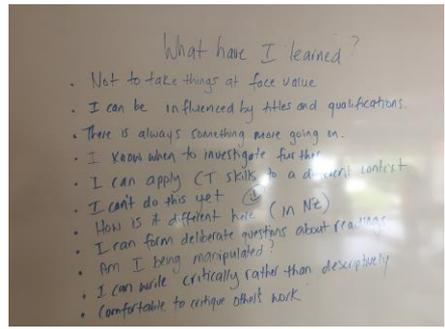
- It's part of good professional practice. (Macdonald, 2006, p.11)
- It's increasingly required by university management and government (for a discussion of this see Gao & Reid, 2017)
- Good evaluation should use both quantitative and qualitative measures.

- I feel comfortable pointing out potential weaknesses in the work of experts
- I am good at recognising the signals used to indicate stages in an argument.
- I can analyse the structure of an argument.
- I understand why tentative language is often used in research papers.
- I know what is meant by a line of reasoning.
- I am aware of how my current beliefs might prejudice fair consideration of an issue.
- I can identify the line of reasoning in an argument.
- I find it easy to evaluate the evidence to support a point of view.
- I can present my own arguments clearly.
- I can tell descriptive writing from analytical writing.

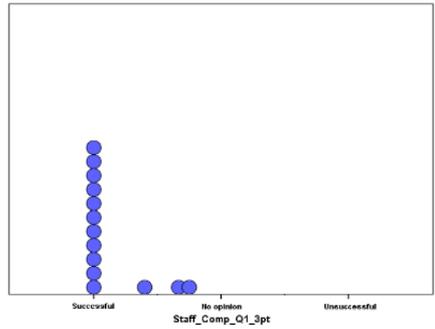
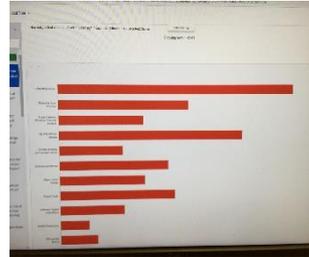


The most useful thing you learned from the Thinking Critically course
 One thing you'd like more of?
 One thing you'd like less of?

Student Learning statistics



Evaluating our programmes



ICALLD evaluation framework

Kirkpatrick Partners (2019)

0	Promotion	Did promotion lead to attendance and/or awareness?
1	Reaction	Were attendees satisfied?
2	Learning	Did attendees report new learning?
3	Behaviour / attitude change	Did attendees report positive behavioural change?
4	Academic attainment	Did attendance lead to better performance?
5	Institutional impact	Did the initiative improve student experience and/or raise the institution's profile?

Indicators/ data collection methods at different levels

Promotion

numbers, pre/post surveys, student ratings, social media

Reaction

questionnaire at end of course/ training

Learning

before and after questionnaires re learning, open-ended questionnaires, discussion with interviewees

Change

observation, focus groups, interviews, surveys

Academic attainment

statistical differences in grades, focus groups, interviews, surveys

Institutional impact

student survey results, publications, media, conference attendance and presentations.

Focus groups

‘small group of people ... trained moderator... explore attitudes, perceptions, feelings and ideas about a topic’ (Denscombe, 2007, cited in Dilshad and Latif, 2013: 192).

Some advantages

- provide a holistic view
- capture individual perceptions
- interactions between people can add to the picture
- provide rich (supplementary) data
- information is presented in participants’ own words

- they can capture information that you might not get in a survey

Some points to consider

Establish purpose/objectives early

How will suitable participants be recruited?

How many groups?

What incentives will be provided? Who pays?

Who should lead the focus groups?

What kinds of questions should be asked?

Are they presented in a logical order?

What location?

What resources are needed?

(Breen, 2006; Dilshad & Latif, 2013)

During the sessions

- The role of the leader/moderator is very important
 - What training does this person get?
- Expectations should be set from the outset
 - Respect
 - Listening
 - Turn-taking

Analysing the data (Breen, 2006; Dilshad & Latif 2013)

- Look for key themes / ideas
- Use participants' own words where appropriate
- Be alert to unexpected findings

Using focus groups to enhance evaluation

Example of the Thinking Critically programme

- A 4-week programme for any postgraduate student.
- Focuses on what it means to be a critical thinker, how to analyse a text critically, and how to write through a critical lens.
- Most who attend are international students

Evaluation measures

Numbers recorded on SL data base	(level 0)
Feedback elicited via email	(level 1 and 2)
Feedback elicited at the start of each Workshop to review the week	(level 2 – 4)
Pre and post course questionnaires	(level 2 and 3)
Review of learning during the course	(level 2 and 3)
Focus group	(level 1-4)

Things we wanted to know

- What did the students hope to improve?
- What did they learn?
- What helped the learning?
- Did they apply any new awareness to their academic study?

What did we learn from the focus group?

What did the students want to improve / learn ?

- Broad reasons for attending
- Overall their aims aligned with the objectives of the course
- Some students stated reasons beyond the course aims
 - Learn more about the kiwi culture
 - Improve their English
 - Wanted more time to practice verbal skills in front of the class

What did they learn ?

- Skills that went beyond paraphrasing
- Affirmation of previous critical thinking skills
- Gained new vocabulary to use when critiquing

- Student mentioned having dedicated time to pay attention to critical thinking

What did we learn from the focus group?

Did they apply new awareness to their academic study (and beyond)

Students reported developing skills in how to:

- problem-solve in other situations.
- select papers for literature review
- Be more precise with language in writing
- critique their own writing
- develop closer reading skills
- [potentially] apply these skills in their home country and work experience.
- be more confident to have conversations where critical thinking is required.

What did we learn from the focus group?

What helped the learning?

- group work, discussion, brainstorming
- learning from others in the class
- explicit instructions for group discussion on slides

What hindered the learning?

- sense of being rushed
- time constraints
- nothing missing in terms of content, but would like more time to discuss in small groups
- difficult and dated reading

Some final thoughts about our focus groups

- We need to pay close attention to the purpose
- Who should run the groups? Should we have different leaders/moderators for different situations?
- Small number of participants (how can we encourage people to come)
- The nature of the participants - who has the strongest voice?

Some final thoughts about the Thinking Critically programme

- Overall, it's a good programme that aligns with student needs
- To some extent it's a work in progress
- Students might attend courses for reasons other than the course aims, or might not be able to fully articulate their reasons for attending
- Ongoing need to find a balance between faster and slower students
- Students need time to talk
- Need to find new and relevant resources

Questions, comments, feedback

References

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Types of questions asked in our focus groups

- 1 What did you hope to learn from [the programme]
- 2 What were the 2 or 3 skills/things that you did learn/develop as a result of attending?
- 3 Were you able to apply these skills in your academic work during the trimester? (note: encourage the participants to give specific examples.
- 4 What was missing, or what would you have liked more in the course?
- 5 In terms of the format/activities what helped you learn?
- 6 How did you find the group setting? [if applicable] Did it have an impact on your learning?
- 7 Was there anything covered in the sessions which was not useful to you, or which you already knew?
- 8 Other: