

Focus Groups: A Constructive Dialog on the Landscape Architecture Program

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Introduction

As part of the course LA 601, Research Methods, at Cal Poly Pomona second year graduate students are required to conceive of and conduct a pilot study to explore the ways research may be applied to the discipline of landscape architecture. The backbone of these pilot studies are self-selected research techniques used as data collection tools. This paper explores the use of focus groups as a research method for querying students on the perceived effectiveness and applicability of the landscape architecture program at Cal Poly Pomona. To inquire into graduate students thoughts regarding their program focused, group discussions were conducted among the three years of graduate students during the winter quarter of 2009. These guided discussions were constructive critiques of specific aspects of the student experience, intended to provide useful feedback to faculty during a transitional period in the Department of Landscape Architecture program's 50-year history.

Background of Focus groups

Research methods can be roughly divided into qualitative and quantitative methods. One qualitative method used since the middle of the 20th Century is a synthesis of the group discussion and the focused interview – a focus group. The typical focus group consists of a group of eight to ten people, expressly chosen by researchers, whose task it is to discuss a particular topic (Edmunds, 1999). During these discussions, interaction among participants is encouraged by a moderator in order to fully flesh out specifics related to the topic of study. The “focus” of the group is a shared collective activity, preferences, buying habits or social characteristics (Kitzinger, 1994). The typical focus group lasts between an hour and hour and a half. Interaction between participants in an unstructured discussion led by a moderator is the goal in generating data, though the research can often go in unexpected directions (Kitzinger, 1995).

Used extensively in marketing research throughout the second half of the 20th Century, focus groups were originally developed to study the effectiveness of propaganda films during and immediately after WWII (Kitzinger, 1995). Though focus groups have seen widespread use in the area of qualitative market research (Calder, 1977), focus groups can be used to study the feelings of nearly any demographic on nearly any topic.

Consistent with Merton's belief, however, that the ' focussed interview is a generic technique, that could and would be applied in every sphere of human behavior and experience, rather than largely confined to matters of interest in marketing research' (1987, 551), focus groups have been widely used in applied social sciences, including evaluation research (Kreuger 1988), communications and organizational research (Byers and Wilcox 1991), media research (Conner, Richards and Fenton 1990; Philo 1993) and decision research (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990, 124-6). (Goss, 1996, p. 113)

Although there are variations to the standard focus group (telefocus groups, mini focus groups and internet or video focus groups) (Edmunds, 1999), the focus groups in this pilot study followed a typical format.

Focus Groups in Landscape Architecture

In their 2005 paper, *What kind of landscape do we want? Past, Present and Future Perspectives*, R. Moore-Colyer and Alister Scott use focus groups to explore the perceptions and tastes of typically underrepresented public groups as they relate to the landscape of rural Britain. Moore-Colyer and Scott found, through the use of focus groups that modern rural residents feel alienated from a planning process that is conducted from afar and is not taking rural values into consideration. Focus groups also provided “meaningful insights into particular viewpoints through discussion and debate” (Moore-Colyer & Scott, 2005).

Nature and nurture, danger and delight: urban women's experiences of the natural world investigates the “human experience of, and interaction with, nature” (Kong, Yuen, Briffett, & Sodhi, 1997, p. 245). In this 1997 study from *Landscape Research*, focus groups were used to study urban women and their “actual and desired experiences of the natural world.” They find that the women in the study have a strong “inclination towards nurturing: teaching, tending, and caring...” (Kong, Yuen, Briffett, & Sodhi, 1997, p. 245).

It gets you away from everyday life: local woodlands and community use – what makes a difference? uses “focus groups, questionnaire surveys and on site observations” to explore how and why people use the “woodlands near their homes.” In their 2005 article from *Landscape Research*, Thompson, Aspinall, Bell and Findlay, found that the proximity of the woodlands as well as the physical condition of the woodlands made the most difference to people’s use of the spaces. Further, “In general, interviewees who remembered visiting woodlands on a frequent basis as children tended to continue visiting woodlands regularly as adults” (Thompson, Aspinall, Bell, & Findlay, 2005, p. 125).

Focusing on fear: the use of focus groups in a project for the Community Forest Unit, Countryside Commission uses focus groups as well as participant observation to study the “social and cultural dimensions of fear in recreational woodlands in the urban fringe” (Burgess, 1996).

Methods and Materials

Focus groups were used as part of a pilot study to investigate the feelings of Masters of Landscape Architecture (MLA) students in the landscape architecture graduate program at Cal Poly Pomona. The goal of the pilot study was to take an introspective look at how MLA students feel about the MLA program. Focus groups are an appropriate technique for gaining access to the perspectives of those most affected yet least able to implement change within the program.

To focus the discussion among the graduate students a discussion guide containing program specific questions was developed and one focus group was conducted with each of the three years of graduate

students. In an attempt to provide some basis for comparison between the three years of graduate students, all years were asked the same questions. In introducing the purpose of the discussion to the participants, it was explained that, in this instance, focus groups were being used as a brainstorming exercise.

The overarching question, “*what would you as grad students like to see added to the MLA grad curriculum?*” was adopted as a general theme for the discussion guide. The word “added” in the above question was chosen over more leading words such as “changed” or “improved” in an attempt to foster a positive and constructive discussion. To provide the group participants with further direction for their conversation, follow up questions in three areas, curriculum, extra-departmental curriculum and extracurricular opportunities were posed under this overall umbrella question. These follow up questions were intended to elicit responses concerning what courses outside of the Department of Landscape Architecture graduate students believe would be beneficial, as well as to provide a means for participants to discuss possible solutions to any suggested changes or additions.

The first subsection of the discussion guide, curriculum, posed the questions: “what *courses* would you like to see integrated into the MLA grad program?” and “what areas of study could be expanded within the MLA grad program? These two questions were essentially formal reiterations of the overall question, but specifically oriented toward the issue of departmental curriculum.

Because many other departments within the university system prove substantive and relevant courses that are of interest to landscape architecture graduate students, a second subsection related to extra-departmental offerings was included. Under this extra-departmental curriculum heading, the specific question was, “what coursework, outside the LA department would MLA grads like to be able to take?”

The extracurricular subsection of the discussion guide included two questions intended to elicit concrete answers on the subject. These questions were, “what do MLA grad students think about a (weekly/biweekly) departmental seminar program?” and “what do MLA grad students think about incorporating an alumni network into the grad program structure?” Specific proposals related to seminar speakers and the development of an alumni network were included as prompts for the participants.

As the discussion guide was being developed, potential participants were being recruited. Email invitations were sent out to those students who had expressed an interest in participating, or students who were generally thought to be sympathetic to such an experience. To provide context for why focus groups were being conducted email invitations for the three years varied slightly, though only in describing the background context for the pilot study. Since the focus groups were conducted a little more than a week before the end of the quarter there was a concern that it might be difficult to recruit a sufficient number of participants, particularly among the first and third year graduate students. To address this potential issue, the email invitations explained to the first year graduate students that they would likely be conducting similar pilot studies next year when they are enrolled in LA 601. Email invitations sent to third year graduate students reminded them that they had been in this position last year. Among the second year graduate students, there was a feeling of camaraderie and an understanding of the significance of the process, as well as a level of reciprocation in that fellow second year students would help one another with various pilot studies. Potential participants were informed

that the results from the focus groups would be made available to the department and faculty, but participation would be confidential and the identities of the participating individuals would not be revealed.

After initial email invitations explaining that the focus group discussions would require an hour and a half, it was determined that an hour would be sufficient. It is not known if this initial overestimation of the time required had any effect on participation. Lacking a more suitable location, the focus group discussions took place in each year's studio space.

The number of participants varied among the three years of graduate student studios (Figure 2). The first year graduate students provided the greatest number of participants, followed by the second and the third years respectively. Differences in the number of participants as well as ramifications to the results will be discussed in the Discussion and Analysis portion of this paper.

Focus group discussions were recorded with a High 8 video camera, but only the audio portion of the conversations was useful. Suggested alterations and factors related to the recording of the group discussions will be explored in the Discussion and Analysis section of this paper. These High 8 video tapes were transcribed verbatim for later analysis using word tabulation, coding techniques and thematic grouping.

As an incentive and a small means of expressing the researcher's gratitude to the participants for their involvement, refreshments were provided to all three groups participating in the focus groups discussions.

Results

Curriculum:

A simple word count of the transcribed conversations clearly showed a desire among all three years for more design classes. "Design" was mentioned a total of 22, 24 and 27 times (Figure 1) among the three graduate years far outnumbering any other topic discussed. When asked, "what courses would MLA grads like to see added into the program?" the first answer offered in one discussion was, "more of a real and basic design class." Expanding on that in the conversation, it was revealed that graduate students would like to explore the "methodology of figuring out the aesthetics of design" as well as the different approaches and theories of design. Related to the issue of the "basic design class" was the relationship of design *theory* and design *history* as fundamental courses upon which to base the curriculum of that "basic design class".

"I came here to learn how to do this and it was kind of exciting, but the ordering is wrong, because we continually have these design courses in the first year where it was... well, what happened to learning design theory, design history and the process and concepts so that by the second year or third year it makes sense to be asked to design."

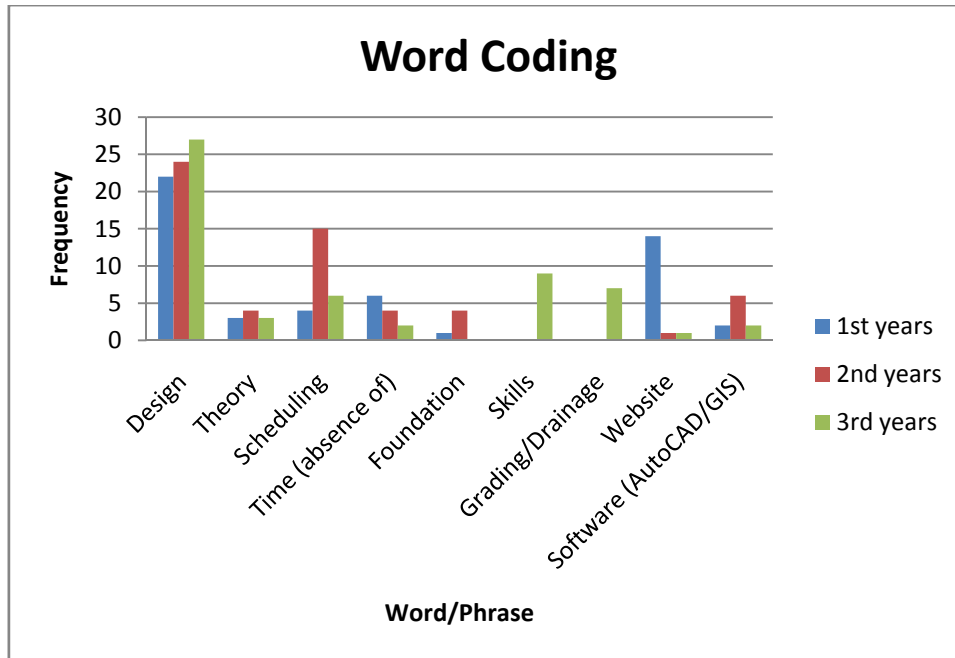


Figure1. Words or phrases by frequency.

Significant topics were raised during the course of the discussions in each group that did not appear in any other focus group session. For example, in the focus group with the first year MLA students the present usefulness and quality of the department’s website was stated as an issue of concern:

P2: ...even if it were a link on the landscape architecture website.

P7: That would be a great class for somebody... to update the website, redesign this website and make it nice...

P2: Make it a useable website.

P7: ...because if you look at other schools websites, they look good, and they’re all modern...

P3: They look good, yeah.

P5: Are you guys talking about the website in general? Because I almost didn’t apply to this school because the website was so crappy.

While the matter of the department’s website was exclusive to the first year MLA students, concerns for having practical, workplace applicable skills dominated parts of the conversation with third year graduate students:

“...we’re graduating in June and I don’t have a great handle on a lot of construction things – the grading, drainage, irrigation – I feel like would be helpful to have... even though the grad program is kind of a regional based program, just having the option to take classes that are more site scale, maybe as an elective course that is offered to us, would be really helpful.”

Extra-departmental Curriculum

The question of extra-departmental offerings and, “what coursework, outside the LA department would MLA grads like to be able to take?” revealed that most graduate students do not see a lack of extra-

departmental offerings as an issue, but rather, found the difficulty of *scheduling* extra-departmental courses as the main encumbrance to taking those courses.

“For me, it doesn’t feel like I can’t take classes outside of the department, it’s that I don’t have time, they don’t fit my schedule. I have taken stuff in plant sciences and regenerative studies, it’s just that usually our schedule is such that we’re locked out of because our other classes conflict.”

During the course of the three focus groups the issue of scheduling came up a total of 25 times (Figure 1). References to scheduling generally occurred in the context of there being a prohibitive number of scheduling conflicts with extra-departmental courses.

Extracurricular

The questions under the last heading of the discussion guide had to do with extracurricular activities: “what do MLA grad students think about a (weekly/biweekly) departmental seminar program?” and “What do MLA grad students think about incorporating an alumni network into the grad program structure?” These questions, related to extracurricular activities yielded the least easily categorizable but most diverse results. Suggestions ranged from student involvement in the reordering of existing landscape architecture courses to a monthly, rotating graduate student lecture series. The former suggestion has to do with student’s desires to build a foundation of knowledge in the basic theories of design before being asked to practice design and the later would be a monthly lecture series organized by a different graduate studio each month. The idea of a departmental seminar program was received enthusiastically by all three focus groups.

Below is a summary of ideas generated in the focus groups:

First year graduate ideas

- Website redesign
- Online calendar of departmental events
- Public access to graduate and undergraduate email list serves
- Increased inter-studio communication
- Increased intra-departmental communication

Second year graduate ideas

- Bulletin board list departmental events
- Weekly/biweekly forum for speakers & activities
- Alumni outreach program

Third year graduate ideas

- Rotating responsibility graduate student studio lecture series
- Student input/suggestions on reordering of existing graduate coursework
- Graduate student SCASLA
- Lay the foundations for the 606 studio earlier (networking/connections/transparency)

Some differences were observed among the responses and discussions between the first and third year focus groups. The first year students seemed to want more structure in the graduate program. They are in the process of transitioning into the program from their undergraduate and previous experiences. In contrast, the third year students who are in the process of transitioning out of the program and graduating were focused on obtaining practical skills that would help them when they enter the job market. Additionally, the first year students had more enthusiasm for taking on additional responsibilities within the department, like organizing graduate seminars, or website redesign. This is in opposition to the feelings of the third year students who were more dubious that they would have the time to participate in such activities.

Discussion and Analysis

Several assumptions were made at the outset of the focus group pilot study. A significant assumption was that among the three years of graduate students participating there would be a level of honesty in answering questions regarding the MLA program. The assumption that participants will provide truthful answers that are unprejudiced and free from preconceived notions of what the moderator wants to hear underlies the participant's responsibility to the researcher or moderator (Greenbaum, 1987). Assuaging this assumption throughout the process was the knowledge that graduate student participants are heavily invested in the MLA program and therefore would provide answers ameliorating any deficiencies with the program. Another significant assumption was that graduate students in the MLA program are qualified to answer the questions posed in the discussion guide. The rationale for dismissing this assumption is that the discussion guide itself was developed specifically for the participants.

In spite of aforementioned assumptions, focus groups have certain strengths as a research tool. One strength is their ability to garner opinions from a variety of stakeholders. In this particular pilot study, in order to get a cross section of feelings related to the topic, focus groups were conducted with all three graduate classes and all three groups were asked the same questions. The responses were candid and a cross section of opinions was obtained. Because all three years were queried, this allowed an opportunity to see how opinions changed through the years, and provided some level of assurance that diverse opinions were sampled. This strength is also expressed in the focus group's ability to provide a deeper understanding of the context surrounding the views of a certain demographic. For example, during the course of any discussion of the areas in which the MLA program could be improved, participants consistently acknowledged the dedication and hard work of current faculty.

The discussions among the three years of graduate students were an example of the level of interaction that occurs between participants in focus groups (Kitzinger, 1994). This interaction provided a means of gauging the level of enthusiasm for a given idea as well as a forum for further exploration of that idea. The focus group was presented and the questions posed in the context of a "brainstorming session," which implied that all manner of opinions and suggestions would be welcome. This led to several novel ideas and ways to address concerns, such as the development of a weekly or biweekly Department of Landscape Architecture forum or the increased inclusion of the Architecture Department in landscape architecture student projects. Along the same lines, results from the focus groups can be unexpected

(Kitzinger, 1995). One of the research questions involved a potential alumni network for Cal Poly landscape architecture. Surprisingly to the researcher, both first and third year focus groups were lukewarm to the idea and did not see much value in it.

An additional strength of the focus groups was the relative speed with which data was able to be collected (Gibbs, 1997). Disregarding any time spent in transit, acquiring refreshments or preparing to conduct the focus groups, the process of generating what was eventually more than thirty pages of transcribed discussions took just over three hours.

Researchers do encounter certain limitations when conducting focus groups, and this pilot study was by no means immune from the influence of those limitations (Gibbs, 1997). Because focus groups use self-selected samples of populations, they are not representative (Mays & Pope, 1995). This sample bias was evident in the focus groups conducted among the three years of MLA graduate students. In particular, the third year focus groups consisted of only four individuals (Figure 2), none of which was a thesis student. Additionally, because focus groups are voluntary, the participants may be those with the most free time or those within the demographic who may have the strongest feelings regarding the topic.

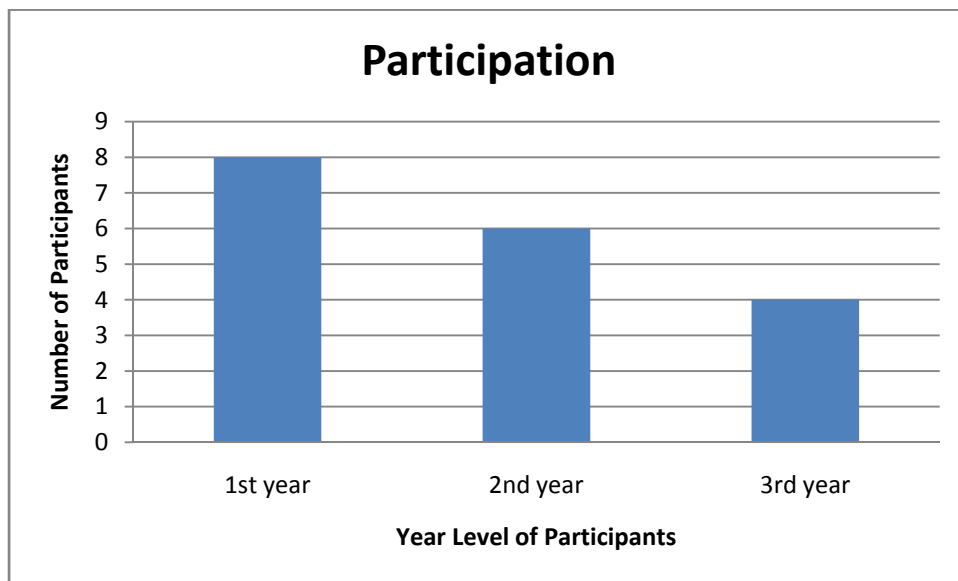


Figure 2. Number of participants by year level.

A different kind of bias that can be encountered when conducting focus groups is related to the moderator (Edmunds, 1999). During the course of the third year focus group, the moderator was able, inadvertently, to steer the discussion and responses in an unintended direction. The word “committee” appears eight times during the course of the conversation, four of those times spoken by the moderator. The idea of committees was nowhere in the question, nowhere in the invitation and not in any discussion of the goals or intentions of the focus group. Yet, the moderator was able to inject the idea of involving committees into possible solutions for some of the questions raised during the course of the discussion.

The most energetic and most outgoing members can often dominate the discussion during a focus group (Goss & Leinbach, 1996). Conversely, shy participants, or those with a minority view may be stifled in a focus group setting (Greenbaum, 2000). In the three focus groups conducted with graduate students, there was not an issue with overbearing participants; however, in both the first and second year focus groups there were participants who were very quiet and whose views were not fully heard or explored. A more experienced moderator would have been able to rectify this issue.

Focus groups can also be time consuming and challenging to organize. The choice of a location for the focus group is important – quiet neutral spaces are ideal and it can often be difficult to ensure that invited members of the group attend (Morgan, Gibbs, Maxwell, & Britten, 2002). In the case of the MLA focus groups quieter spaces would have been beneficial.

Statistics or quantitative results are not produced by focus groups (Calder, 1977). The discussion among participants while informative is not able to tell the researchers what percent of a given demographic feels a certain way. Instead, in the literature focus group results are often relayed anecdotally. Direct quotes from an individual participant are used to generalize common feelings and themes from the larger group.

Lessons learned

The importance of providing food was not a novel discovery (Goss & Leinbach, 1996), but the level of enthusiasm and participation generated by providing food was surprising. As an incentive to potential participants, I brought bagels and juice to the morning and afternoon discussions, and beer and wine to the evening discussions. When trying to recruit participants for the first year focus group I was asking who would like to be involved and getting few enthusiastic responses, until I brought in the refreshments. At which point significant participation was achieved. In the literature copayments are often used as a means to encourage participation as well as to offset any potential expenses incurred by the participants (Edmunds, 1999). The consideration of appropriate copayments for the group of participants suggests that tailoring copayments toward the needs or expectations of the group is an important aspect of recruitment.

My experience of recording the focus groups suggests that a reasonable quality audio recording is sufficient for the purposes of transcription (Bryman, 2001). The use of video was unnecessary and in hindsight, I would have approached the recording process differently. Rather than using a High 8 video recorder, I would suggest the use of a digital recording device. These small and inexpensive devices are unobtrusive during the focus groups discussions and provide a means of transferring and preserving the audio digitally. Using a small digital recording device would have also alleviated the problem of audio inaudibilities caused by the participant's back being turned toward the video camera.

The task of transcribing the focus group discussions was exceptionally onerous and exceedingly time consuming (Bryman, 2001). Transcribing three hours of focus group discussions took upwards of 20 hours, complicated by sections of inaudibility and the level of proficiency of the transcriber. For future studies, I would recommend using a transcription service to expedite the process.

Future Directions

The pilot focus group study among MLA students raised several issues that could warrant further study. The enthusiastic response regarding a monthly departmental forum could be further explored. Additional focus groups could also be conducted with other stakeholders within the Cal Poly Pomona Landscape Architecture program. The views of faculty members, undergraduates, and alumni could be valuable in obtaining a complete picture of possible additions to the MLA program. Surveys would be a complimentary method that could more quantitatively query the opinions of graduate students. Surveys could reach more students and ensure that shy members of the community and those with minority views also have their opinions registered. Likely, the concepts, programs and activities MLA students would like to see added to their program are not unique. It could be interesting to conduct other focus groups with graduate students in other departments and/or at MLA programs at different universities.

Conclusion

To study the views and opinions of MLA graduate students regarding their program three focus groups were conducted. The focus groups revealed common themes, including a desire for additional fundamental design courses integrated with more thorough theory, the need to address scheduling issues relative to extra-departmental courses and improved communication between the graduate studios. Differences between the graduate students on a variety of subjects were also observed. Examples of differences are first year suggestions to redesign the departmental website and third year suggestions to begin the 606-studio process earlier. Suggestions for ways to address all of the issues raised were also discussed.

This questions presented in this pilot are intended to promote constructive self analysis within the Department of Landscape Architecture, but the worth of self introspection and critical self analysis is only meaningful upon the outward expression and implementation of changes influenced by that introspection and analysis.

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