

learning landscape project

Research Methods: 'Movers and Shapers' Focus Groups

About the 'Movers and Shapers' Focus Groups

'Movers and Shapers' Focus Groups are a type of facilitated group discussion session, designed to explore a pre-selected theme of interest. Five 'Movers and Shapers' sessions were conducted by the Learning Landscape Project between June 2006 and November 2007, involving a total of 60 participants (with a staff:student participant ratio of approximately 1:2). The 'Movers and Shapers' sessions were designed to capture the opinions and attitudes of students and staff, in relation to personal experiences of teaching and learning at Cambridge University. Data collected using this research method included facilitator notes, audio/video recordings (subject to the permission of participants), and related (researcher-created) transcripts, all of which were subsequently available for analysis by the researchers using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (TAMS and Inqscribe).

Rationale and Research Warrant

'Movers and Shapers' Focus Groups were identified by researchers as an appropriate participatory research process that could encourage staff and students to speak as "equals". Researchers were inspired by recent research on "cultural probes" (Gaver et. al. 1999), which is best known within the disciplines of Interaction Design and Human Factors, but whose methods are increasingly transferred to other domains, including education and health and social care.

Process

The basic principle of 'Movers and Shapers' sessions is that the participants are divided into sub-groups, and approximately half the members of each group are 'rotated' from sub-group to sub-group at set intervals, for the duration of the session.

'Movers and Shapers' Focus Groups were held to explore the following themes:

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| 1/06/2007 | 'Student Experiences of Teaching and Learning' |
| 15/10/2007 | 'Student and Staff Experiences and Perceptions of Teaching and Learning'; held in conjunction with the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTS) Lunch Series |
| 14/11/2007 | 'Inspiration and Innovation in Teaching and Learning in Maths, Sciences and Engineering' |
| 22/11/2007 | 'Inspiration and Innovation in Teaching and Learning in Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences' |
| 18/01/2008 | 'Students with Disabilities: Issues and Challenges for Teaching and Learning' |

Participants were recruited to 'Movers and Shapers' sessions by various mechanisms, including email invitations distributed to the Colleges' Senior Tutors, the Project Steering Group, and the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTS) email list; email invitations sent to previous LLP participants (many of whom were initially recruited to the project via one of two online student surveys); and publication of event notices on the project website.

Participants were invited to participate in a structured discussion over lunch / refreshments; participants in some groups (14/11/2007; 22/11/2007; 18/01/2008) were offered a book voucher as an honorarium. Prior to the commencement of the activity, researchers explained the process to the assembled participants and asked them to sign consent forms.

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At this stage, the group was divided up into one or more smaller sub-groups (ranging in size from two to six participants), and each sub-group was allocated a discussion facilitator. Each sub-group would sit together at a separate table (space permitting, each sub-groups would occupy a separate room). A recording device was placed on each table, and participants were invited to make notes on the paper table-cloths. Some sub-groups were also recorded using digital video cameras.

Discussion proceeded on each table for a set period of 15 minutes. At the end of the set period, participants at each table randomly selected a card that designated them as a “mover” or a “shaper”. The “movers” would then move to the next discussion table, while the “shapers” at each table stayed in the same place.

The role of the “movers” could be summed up as “challengers”, while the “shapers” could be described as “synthesizers”. At the next table, the “shapers” would inform the “movers” of the previous discussion, and attempt to convince them of the veracity of the arguments made. The “movers” would question and challenge the “shapers”, and bring new ideas from other tables. “Shapers” were free to reject or adapt to the input from the “movers”, and the “movers” were informed by the perspective adopted by this group of “shapers”. The process repeated until the “movers” have visited each table.

‘Movers and Shapers’ events were designed to last between one and one-and-a-half hours. The events were found to work best with a minimum of five and a maximum of thirty-five participants, excluding facilitators.

Benefits of the ‘Movers and Shapers’ Focus Groups

‘Movers and Shapers’ Focus Groups were found to be a stimulating and engaging research method, which produced a wealth of qualitative data. Discussion sessions were enjoyable and accessible for all participants, and the small size of discussion groups meant that participants generally found it easy to speak up and participate. The advantage of the method over traditional discussion group arrangements is that the “group-think” and “loudest voice” syndromes tended to break down. Ideas were challenged, new ideas were introduced, and ideas that evolved through the process were tested and modified in the course of discussion.

About the Learning Landscape Project

The Learning Landscape Project (2006—2008) is a research project that was initiated to create a descriptive framework of learning and teaching at the University of Cambridge. For further information, please visit the project website:

<http://www.caret.cam.ac.uk/learninglandscape/>

References and Further Reading

Gaver, W.W., Dunne, A., and Pacenti, E. (1999). “Cultural Probes.” *Interactions*. Volume 6 (1). pp. 21–29.

Gaver, W., Boucher, A., Pennington, S., and Walker, B. (2004). “Cultural Probes and the value of uncertainty.” *Interactions*. Volume 11 (5). pp. 53-56.