

The 'world café' approach to experiencing group data generation



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In the social sciences, students often want to use focus groups or group interviews for data collection, but do not have direct experience of collecting qualitative data in a group. It can be quite challenging for them to appreciate the complexities of collecting data from a group – and to think about the different ways in which data can be collected and therefore the type of data that is yielded by different methods. To help students consider some of the possible methods for collecting data from a group of people, I use a '[world café](#)' style workshop: students participate in different activities to get a group of people talking, and have the opportunity to reflect on how it felt to participate.

I use a large non-tiered teaching room, with tables set up for groups of 4-8 students. Each table is set up to run a different type of qualitative group data collection method for students to experience. These activities can vary depending on the discipline and cohort. At the end of this piece, I have included some of the examples that I use in Education with both Master's and Undergraduate students, to illustrate to students a wide range of types of group data collection methods. The students spend around 30 minutes at each activity (depending on the length of the session, number of students, and number of activities). After participating in each activity, students take a few minutes to note down their thoughts and reactions to that activity, then switch activities. At the end of the session, we have a whole-class plenary where students discuss how each activity felt for them, when they think it might be helpful (i.e. with what participant groups, or what type of research question), and whether they see potential for any of the methods in their research.

Why I use this approach

As a Psychology undergraduate student in the 1990s, I remember doing lots of different practicals in class where we learnt about research methods, but the thing that really helped me consider the *quality* of methods was volunteering as a participant in numerous other studies.

We didn't have to, but I signed up to every study that I was eligible to participate in: I really enjoyed seeing what other people were researching and reflecting on the processes that they used to collect data and how that made me feel as a participant. I still enjoy participating in any projects that I am eligible for and find it helps me reflect on methods (and I'm nosey!). The world café approach can create a noisy and slightly chaotic feel to the classroom, but it is generally energising for students and provides quick-fire opportunities for participation, and for explicit reflection on the participation process. Different people engage in the different activities in different ways, and hearing from others how they found the experience is very powerful – we can all tend to assume that just because *we* enjoy something, everyone will! The 'aha' moments I see come from students recognising how different approaches to group data collection can work for different participants, and for different types of research question.

Points to consider

- I generally introduce all the activities at the start, as well as including clear and simple instructions on each table.
- In the plenary, I share general pointers about group data collection, and my experiences of when the different methods have worked well or less well.
- Getting the right stimulus question for each activity is really important – it needs to be something that all students will have experience of or a view on.
- It helps to include a 'chair' role for each activity, so one of the students acts as a light-touch facilitator instead of participating. No student should take this role more than once, so they get to participate as well.
- Remember to allow time for activity orientation, post-activity reflection, changeovers – and it's really important to allow time for the plenary. As a teacher, I find that timekeeping needs to be very strong for this type of session!
- It may be that students only experience some of the activities, depending on how many there are. This works fine so long as there is an effective plenary: time is needed for the teacher to ask students to share some thoughts on what worked well with the different activities, what was challenging, how the different activities made them feel as a participant (and, where relevant, as a facilitator or chair), and to follow this up by drawing students' responses together and possibly relating to their own experiences of using or participating in the different methods.

- If there is a large class, it works well to have more than one table doing the same activity.

Conclusion

This session requires thought and preparation for the activities, and strong facilitation skills from the teacher. With this in place, it provides students with the opportunity to experience a range of different types of qualitative data generation in groups. I find that in the plenary, student usually discuss which approaches would work well (or less well) for different participant groups and different research questions, and how the different activities could work as a part of data generation – perhaps within a more traditional group interview or focus group, or as one in a sequence of data generation activities. Seeing their peers' reactions to different activities (different people engage more in different activities!) provides the opportunity for students to put themselves in others' shoes and consider the data generation from a range of perspectives: this is invaluable when it comes to considering how their own research is experienced by participants.

Examples of group discussion activities – there are many more that could be used, these are just some of my own personal choices!

Creative collage: The task is to illustrate a process or 'journey' using creative collage to provide a timeline (for example, the decision to go to university, or their relationship with education as they progressed through the years of compulsory education, or what a successful career might look like after graduation). The table includes big sheets of A1 paper, coloured pens, glue, items such as brightly coloured feathers, pipe cleaners, pieces of glittery card and whatever else you think might be fun. The activity is designed for students to get 'stuck-in' on a creative activity that will get them talking relatively informally. The data come from the conversation participants have about how they illustrate the 'journey', why they want to include things, what was important – and then how the timeline is described. Subsequent groups could add to the original timeline or create their own.

Sticky note ideas: Each participant has a set of sticky notes, and writes down their thoughts or reactions or ideas (one per post-it) in response to a prompt or stimulus or question (for example 'What makes a good student?' or 'What are the components of a good education system?' or

‘What are you excited about regarding doing your dissertation? What are your fears?’). They then pool the sticky notes and group or order them in a way that seems helpful or relevant to them. The data come from both what is on the sticky notes, and (more importantly) the conversation that happens about how the ideas should be grouped – this helps reveal what is important to people.

Active listening: One person is nominated as chair. A question is posed to the group, and participants take a set amount of time (usually 10 minutes) to write down their thoughts in response to that question (for example, ‘The steps I go through when preparing and learning from assessment’, or ‘The challenges I have faced on my course so far, and how I have managed them’). Each person in the group has 2 minutes exactly (timed) to share their points with the rest of the group. If they stop before the timer has gone, that is fine – they just wait for the timer to go (and they may think of more things to say after a pause). Every other individual in the group is an active listener, they pay attention and can respond non-verbally (e.g. with nods), but must not talk or interrupt: the speaker holds the floor for their 2 minutes. The chair takes notes, and at the end of the 2 minutes feeds back to the speaker with a summary of their points (max 1 minute). The data come from what each individual says in their uninterrupted 2 minutes.

Group interview with the jelly baby tree: Each participant has a picture of the ‘blob tree’ (an illustration of a tree with blob-like people at different places and in different stances on or around the tree - available from numerous sources online). The facilitator poses a question that asks participants to explain which of the jelly babies illustrates how they feel in relation to a particular issue, for example, how they feel about their course, or to what extent they feel like a part of where they live. Participants take a minute or two to consider this and then start a conversation about which jelly baby best illustrates them and why. The data come from the conversation.