Using a virtual learning environment as a research tool: online focus groups in WebCT

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What is an online focus group?
“a selected group of individuals who have volunteered to participate in a moderated, structured, online discussion in order to explore a particular topic for the purpose of research” [1]

Advantages of online focus groups
- Access to global sample including those who are typically difficult to reach e.g. housebound and busy professionals.
- Improved quality of data gathered due to:
  - The written, asynchronous nature of the groups;
  - Physical distance between researcher and participants;
  - Anonymity.

Challenges of online focus groups
- IT Skills and access to internet;
- Authenticity;
- Ethics [2].

Using a virtual learning environment (WebCT) to facilitate online focus groups
WebCT has been used successfully to collect research data [3][4][5]:
- WebCT can provide a secure, confidential, safe online research environment through:
  - Institutional policies;
  - Password protected area;
  - Enforcement of ground rules: ‘netiquette’.
- WebCT can offer the research a distinctive, user-friendly, customisable environment;
- Institutional support available for WebCT can be called upon by the participants and researcher.

Issues when using WebCT
- Ownership of WebCT:
  - Who has access?
  - What happens if there is a Freedom of Information request?
  - How much support is really available and when?
- Accessibility:
  - How compliant is WebCT for those who have a visual impairment?

Case studies

Exploring the experience of anorexia nervosa
Sarah Williams (Psychology)
- A completely Internet based phenomenological study with participants at varying stages of anorexia;
- Three online focus groups of 12, 4 and 10 participants – each lasting 4 – 5 weeks;
- Focus groups were supplemented with e-interviews.

Occupational therapists' perceptions of preterm children's academic difficulties in the early years of mainstream schooling
Maria Giatsi-Clausen (Occupational Therapy)
- A mixed methodology underpinned by philosophical principles of pragmatism;
- A qualitative part of the study employed asynchronous online focus groups to further explore the findings of a nation-wide survey;
- Two online focus groups of 6 and 7 participants respectively – each lasting 4 weeks.

Back pain sufferers’ experiences and perceptions of self help for pain management
Ann Robertson (Health Psychology)
- An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) investigated self help in back pain;
- This qualitative study complemented a randomised controlled trial of a self help intervention for early back pain;
- Pilot online focus group with 3 participants lasting 2 weeks.