CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Using Focus Groups to Engage Veterinary Students in Course Redesign and Development

Jason B. Coe • Tanya Darisi • Tracy Satchell • Shane W. Bateman • Natasha Kenny

ABSTRACT

Students’ perceptions about the quality of teaching have been shown to influence their approaches to learning and studying. The literature suggests that understanding student perceptions is critical to making informed decisions about curriculum development so that courses meet objectives, enhance engagement, and, ultimately, improve learning. However, the assessment of students’ perceptions of their courses and the quality of teaching is frequently limited to an end-of-term course evaluation survey. While these course evaluations may be useful in providing a summative assessment, they do not typically provide insight into the reasons and influences that underlie student ratings. Achieving this type of understanding can be accomplished through qualitative methodology, which is a process of investigation used to reveal the depth, complexity, and nuances of perceptions and experiences. In the current article, we report the use of focus groups as a method of gaining in-depth understanding of student perceptions for course redesign. We present the redesign of the Art of Veterinary Medicine II course, a second-year core offering within the Doctor of Veterinary Medicine curriculum at the Ontario Veterinary College in Guelph, Canada. A series of student focus groups were held to gain greater insight into student perceptions of the course objectives, format, and content. Findings were then considered in the redevelopment of the course to better engage students and their various learning styles. Summative course evaluations as well as informal feedback before and after the focus groups indicate a notable improvement in student experiences and perceptions of the course format and content following the focus-group informed course redesign.

Key words: educational approaches for learning, educational scholarship, focus groups, course design, course evaluation, student feedback

INTRODUCTION

The quality of teaching and learning has become an increasingly important area of attention in medical and veterinary education. Within the literature, a core discussion focuses on the repositioning of teaching from teaching as transmission of facts to teaching as a process of supporting reflection, student engagement, and self-direction. There is growing recognition that quality teaching lies in the balance between the assumptions of pedagogy, which are subject- and teacher-centered, and those of adult education, which are learner-centered.1,2 Research clearly suggests that teaching quality has a strong influence on the achievement of students’ learning outcomes and that a learning environment which has clear goals, establishes subject matter relevance, involves the learner, and encourages independence and responsibility for learning will best promote student success.3,4 It has also been suggested that increasing attention to the scholarship of teaching and opportunities for student engagement and reflection can contribute to both high quality teaching and learning.5–8

The literature has shown that student feedback constitutes a valuable source of evidence for assessing teaching effectiveness and quality.9 One regular practice for obtaining student feedback to support quality in teaching is instructor or course evaluations. These evaluations are most commonly implemented in the form of an end-of-term survey.10 The majority of researchers consider student ratings to be a useful measure for summative evaluations of teaching effectiveness, and they are frequently used in personnel decisions.11–13 However, there are strong critiques of course evaluations as well as limitations to their usefulness for formative assessments on curriculum.11 Further, there are concerns that students do not see the impact of their contribution to summative evaluations and, therefore, might not take course evaluations seriously.9 While course evaluations may provide instructors with a global assessment of students’ perceptions, they do not typically provide instructors with insight into the factors that influenced ratings or guidance on how to make meaningful improvements.8,14

Researchers have further argued for a deeper understanding of student perceptions than that obtained through a survey.11 Beyond feedback, there is the need to understand the barriers to learning as students perceive them as well as the factors that facilitate engagement with the curriculum, such as perceptions of clarity of course objectives and vocational relevance.15 Often, standard end-of-term course evaluation surveys include space for students to provide written comments that could be used in formative assessments. When the opportunity to provide written comments is available, research has found that these data are often not analyzed, interpreted, or used.11 Reasons for not using student comments obtained through evaluation surveys include the perception that student comments are misleading or inaccurate.11 As well, instructors might be reluctant to invest the time and effort required to analyze written comments.12,16,17
Yet, the need for data on student perceptions of instruction and curriculum is clear. As Smith has noted, because of the shift toward more learner-centered approaches, it is unlikely that faculty, as students themselves, experienced the kinds of environments in which they are now being expected to teach. Data that are systematically collected and analyzed are critical to evidenced-based practice and can enhance faculty’s ability to make informed course decisions and improvements. Educational literature, along with educational research undertaken by several institutions, can provide needed insight into the use of evidence-based practice in guiding the delivery of quality teaching. However, educators still require practical, on-the-ground strategies to obtain the kind of focused, timely data they need to improve their courses as part of an ongoing commitment to student learning and quality assurance. Periodic end-of-term student focus groups, supplementary to course evaluations, may be a useful tool in eliciting contextually based insights into a course that may drive the future refinement and ongoing development of course curriculum, without the need for a full program of research or review.

This article presents the use of focus groups as a method of gaining in-depth understanding of veterinary students’ perceptions for course redesign, using as an example the redesign of the Art of Veterinary Medicine (AVM) II course, a second-year core offering within the Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) curriculum at the Ontario Veterinary College (OVC) in Guelph, Canada.

**FOCUS GROUPS IN EVALUATION AND MEDICAL EDUCATION**

Focus groups are used extensively in evaluation research to help explain program functioning and impact. As a qualitative method, they make use of guided discussion to reveal issues, experiences, and perceptions about a topic. They have been used for generating and testing hypotheses and for identifying relevant constructs. Rich in content, focus-group data help researchers understand the why behind the attitudes, perceptions, and nuances of people’s experiences within a particular social sphere.

In formative-evaluation research, data obtained through focus groups can provide insights into program stakeholders’ experiences of what is—and is not—working, where there are gaps and barriers, and how the intentions and goals of a program are taken up and interpreted. These insights are then used to inform decisions about program improvement and development, including what needs to change and how.

Interviews, as another qualitative strategy, are also useful in providing a deeper understanding of individual experience and perceptions. However, focus groups can be more efficient than interviews for course evaluation in that several individuals can be engaged simultaneously. As participants are often encouraged to respond to each other, exchange stories, and ask each other questions, focus groups can further be used to assess the ways in which meanings are co-constructed in interactions between participants as well as the ways in which consensus and divergence emerge and are handled by a group. Because focus groups rely so much on successful interaction between multiple participants, the decision to use this methodology must be guided by attention to the potentially threatening nature of the topic of interest as well as the potential for harmful power dynamics. Focus groups might not be appropriate when topics are sensitive or controversial or when openness about behavior and attitudes might invoke negative repercussions if revealed in a group setting. As well, mixing individuals who hold different levels of status and authority can also negatively affect participants’ comfort level and engagement. Researchers have found that more homogeneous groups, in which participants are familiar with each other or share relevant characteristics and experiences, tend to be more effective in eliciting rich discussion.

Focus groups typically rely on purposive sampling, with participants invited according to their awareness of the issues under study and their anticipated potential to contribute. As focus groups require interaction and the group dynamic to be carefully negotiated, they should be led by a skilled moderator who engages in active listening to prompt further conversation, ensures respectful discussion, and provides the opportunity for all to participate. The moderator also works to summarize and reflect on issues and responses with the group, ensuring that key messages are heard and understood correctly. Deciding on a focus group thus requires a consideration of the ways in which the topic, participants, and moderator will interact to either create or disrupt a safe, non-threatening environment in which participants can openly share their thoughts and experiences. When appropriate and done well, focus groups are effective in creating a space for a carefully planned and controlled group discussion that elicits relevant perceptions within a defined area of interest.

Within general medical education, there is growing attention to the use of focus groups as a strategy to evaluate programs and support continuing professional development. Focus groups have been identified as a useful method of determining learning needs and developing effective continuing education programs for physicians. Student focus groups have been used to provide timely, narrative information to improve course content and delivery, and they have been shown to be a valuable strategy for eliciting constructive feedback. They have been used effectively in curriculum review to improve basic science courses and in evaluating the process of training basic clinical and procedural skills. In a study of curriculum redesign, focus groups were the chosen methodology when researchers wished to obtain as much information as possible about student perceptions and attitudes so that faculty could make meaningful programmatic changes. A noted strength was the ability of the focus group to tap unanticipated responses, such as the behavioral impact of a course or the specific influence of the course instructor, whereas survey data provided considerably less insight.

**METHODS**

Given their demonstrated effectiveness for obtaining program-relevant data on student perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs, focus groups were used in the redesign and development of the AVM II course at the OVC.
The Art of Veterinary Medicine

The Art of Veterinary Medicine is offered as part of the DVM curriculum at the OVC to build students’ knowledge base and skill set in the areas of clinical communications, human-animal interactions, and professional development, and is delivered as three integrated courses across the first three years of the four-year DVM program. AVM was introduced as a core requirement of the DVM program at the OVC in 2000 as part of a restructuring of the overall curriculum. The intention of the courses was to provide students with opportunities to grow in areas required for veterinary practice that were not traditionally a formal part of the DVM curriculum, including professionalism and communication. The courses are presented using didactic lectures, small-group tutorials, and simulated-client labs, specifically offering students the opportunity to explore and apply the use of effective communication skills. The course descriptions emphasize the development of communication, problem-solving, conflict-resolution, stress-management, and business skills.

The objectives of the AVM courses, with their focus on interpersonal skills (e.g., communication and conflict-resolution skills) and professional development, require a teaching approach that supports both reflection and deep learning. Because professional interactions are dynamic and variable, often influenced by subtle shifts and nuances in communication, acquiring the necessary skills must go beyond approaches that emphasize memorization and routine responses. Through deep learning, students approach the material with the interest and intent to fully understand concepts and application. Reflective practice enhances deep learning by encouraging one to step back from an experience and think about it critically and analytically. Reflective practice has been identified as essential to developing competency in decision making, problem solving, and communication. Teaching reflective practice is becoming an increasingly important aspect within veterinary curricula. This trend is manifest in the AVM courses both in content and format as students are required to engage in reflective practice to build and strengthen their skills to successfully negotiate professional and clinical interactions. In this way, AVM is a critical opportunity for students to develop professionalism, including learning how to act and respond in clinical and professional relationships.

In 2007-2008, 110 students were enrolled in the second AVM course (i.e., AVM II). In that year, concern over the quality and effectiveness of AVM II arose when 60 students completed an overall course evaluation which suggested that AVM II was not fully meeting its objectives. The majority of the students who completed the course evaluation survey rated assignments and evaluations as well as texts, notes, reference materials, and learning resources as being of little or no use to their learning. As well, 65% of the students who completed the course evaluation survey rated the quality of the course content as poor or very poor and 25% of students rated it as average (Figure 1).

Following this feedback on the course, as well as informal student complaints, it was decided that the course should be redesigned to better meet its learning objectives and fulfill its role in the AVM curriculum. Wishing to redesign the course in a way that could respond to students’ learning needs and contribute more to their overall learning experience, the incoming course coordinator pursued student input through a series of focus groups.

The study protocol was reviewed and cleared by the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted with students who had recently completed the second year of the DVM program at the OVC. The focus groups were designed to gain a deeper understanding of student perceptions and experiences beyond those presented in the end-of-term course evaluation surveys. A trained moderator, enlisted from Teaching Support Services at the University of Guelph, was engaged to facilitate focus-group discussions, and a student research assistant who had recently completed the second year of the DVM program was hired to assist with focus-group development and administration. The course coordinator led the project, developing the topic guide and consulting with the moderator to ensure that she could initiate and probe discussions relating to students’ perspectives and ideas regarding AVM. The coordinator removed himself from any direct role in recruitment and execution to minimize his impact on students’ ability to feel free to honestly share their perceptions and experiences. The discussion guide was open-ended and covered perceptions of course objectives, content, format, and perceived value, including what students liked and did not like about the course (Appendix 1).

Participants who had completed AVM II in 2007-2008 were recruited through an E-mail developed by the faculty researcher. The student research assistant sent this communication to the second year OVC class listserv on the faculty member’s behalf six weeks after the completion of the course. Participants were made aware in advance that each focus group would be audio-taped to produce verbatim written transcripts that would be accessible to the course coordinator following participant de-identification. Participants completed a short demographic questionnaire and received dinner for their participation.

Figure 1: Student ratings of the overall quality of course content of the Art of Veterinary Medicine II in 2007–2008 (N = 60) and 2008–2009 (N = 90); p < .001
ANALYSIS
Focus-group discussions were analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying dominant and relevant themes in accordance to the purpose of study. Consistent with the approach outlined by Krueger,24 the analysis consisted of several stages, beginning with an initial reading of the transcripts to become familiar with the data and then developing categories, coding, and sorting data. Once sorted into categories that aligned with the components of the course (e.g., objectives, lecture, practice, student evaluation), data were further coded to identify valence (positive or negative perceptions and experiences) and sub-themes. Attention was given to both consistent and divergent perceptions and experiences. The description and interpretation of the themes were guided by the purpose of the study, so that data useful to the redesign of the course were given priority in the analysis. Broad themes and the supporting data are highlighted in the following discussion to demonstrate the kinds of insights and understandings that were made available through the focus groups.

RESULTS
A total of 15 students responded and consented to participate in the focus-group study. Three focus groups were conducted with five students participating in each. All focus groups were held during the evening in a local hotel conference room located off-campus and ran for 90 minutes. The focus groups were structured to ensure that all participants provided input into the discussion. As a result, participation was fairly consistent both within and across each group. Consistency in this respect reflects the skill of the moderator, who played an essential role in ensuring the quality of the discussion and thus the data. The moderator started each session by clarifying her role in ensuring that all participants have the opportunity to share their thoughts and experiences without any one individual dominating the discussion as well as her role in keeping the discussion focused and on time.

Across all focus groups, three interrelated themes emerged that could account for the low to moderate scores on the course evaluation: (1) concern with a perceived misalignment between course objectives and course delivery, including format and student assessment; (2) concern with the perceived relevance of course content and its applicability to future careers; and (3) concern with the ability of the course to support the development of professional skills, including communication and conflict resolution. In addition to these themes, participants were also clear about what they valued in the course and provided concrete suggestions for improvement.

Focus-group discussions revealed a perceived misalignment between course objectives and delivery. Participants identified the emphasis of the course to be on communication and interpersonal and professional skills, characterizing the course as “non-science,” “non-traditional,” and “a means of broadening [students’] horizons . . . beyond clinical skills.” Participants were consistent in their appreciation for this emphasis and recognition of the importance of these skills in enhancing their ability to provide quality care and build positive relationships with clients and colleagues.

However, while they recognized that the course aimed to build students’ knowledge base and skill set in the areas of clinical communications and professional development, the participants questioned the effectiveness of the course format and student assessment to support their development of these skills. They distrusted the focus on lectures, reported a perceived inconsistency in the marking of communication labs by using client simulators as evaluators, and believed that the exams encouraged memorization over critical thinking. Some participants felt that the marking of the simulated-client labs did not fully support a safe, supportive environment for learning communication skills. The perceived focus on memorization and rote learning in exams was held as an indicator that student evaluation was inconsistent with the overall intention of the course. The exams, for example, were characterized as follows:

It was more regurgitation . . . Grade six memory work.

I found both the midterm and the final this year a lot of memorization, the sort of binge and purge and for a course, a non-traditional course such as this, I don’t think that belongs there because I don’t receive any benefit from memorizing.

Each of these quotes also reflects the evident confidence that participants had in themselves as students. They commented with confidence on their own learning styles, capabilities, and intelligence, supporting each other in this construction of both their intelligence and learning needs. The following excerpt demonstrates the interactive way in which two participants supported and built upon each other’s perceptions and characterizations of the value of the course content. One participant (P3) initiated the metaphor, while another (P4) built upon it and then shifted the discussion.

PARTICIPANT 3 (P3): We like nuts, not rice cakes!

PARTICIPANT 4 (P4): It’s so true! In terms of what we are learning.

P3: We want little pieces of high-calories bits rather than a whole bunch of rice cakes.

P4: I kind of said, the way I said it when I wrote it down is like, we soak up information like sponges—

P3: Yep, right, if you give us too much it starts dripping out.

This exchange regarding the need for “high-calorie” information also exemplifies the second broad theme that emerged across all three focus groups: students’ concern with the relevance of some of the course content and its applicability to their future careers. While some lecture topics were very highly valued as informative, motivating, and reaffirming of the students’ decision to become veterinarians, other lectures and assignments were characterized as “fluff,” “rice cakes,” or “busy work.” Perceptions of the AVM as the course “where random extras are thrown in” seemed to obscure the focus on obtaining practical “real-world” skills. Participants regularly hypothesized about what veterinary students would need to be
successful in a professional practice, making judgments about which issues are essential and which are extraneous and irrelevant. Time and energy spent on the extras was seen as wasted. Some of these judgments were idiosyncratic; one or two participants within the group may not have liked a particular topic, while others within the group did. The identification of the topics that were deemed relevant and those that were not was often obtained through the moderator’s ability to follow up and ask for more specific details about participants’ perspectives. For example, the following exchange indicates how the moderator (M) used follow-up questions to ensure that the information obtained through focus groups was useful to a reconsideration of course content.

PARTICIPANT 2 (P2): Non-traditional topics were great. It’s just really important to keep them in perspective and really, don’t book them at 4:30 or 5:30 at night or on a Friday because, don’t be insulted if we don’t show up but we’re exhausted.

MODERATOR (M): Yeah, of course. Can you give me an example of, just a couple examples, of the non-traditional topics?

P2: Poetry or OSPCA (Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals).

P3: Writing a newspaper article.

Consistent across all groups was concern with the perceived lack of applicability of the past year’s ethics lectures, which were said to emphasize theory rather than ethical decision making. Participants regularly voiced concerns with their ability to negotiate ethical issues in client relationships. They requested more discussion and debate around current issues, or “hot topics,” in veterinary medicine as well as more scenarios and practice resolving ethical challenges. For example, one participant requested “giving scenarios and saying, you know, this is what’s happened in the past, this is how people have gotten in trouble with things…”

This focus on the need for practical, real examples and scenarios suggests that although participants demonstrated confidence in their abilities as students, they were also very much aware of their need to develop as professionals. It is also connected to the third broad theme identified in the focus groups: concern with the ability of the course to support the development of professional skills, including communication and conflict resolution. One of the strongest messages across all groups was an appreciation for the communication labs that involved simulated clients as a strategy for developing necessary communication skills and confidence. However, participants also identified several challenges associated with these labs, which related to the actors, coaching, marking and feedback, and the number of students in the groups. Participants made multiple suggestions of ways in which to improve the laboratories, one of which was to devote more of the course to small-group practice sessions. At times, participants disagreed about how to best change the labs, and inconsistent suggestions were made across focus groups. Despite these inconsistencies, dependence on this component of AVM was clear as was the lab’s perceived importance to student learning and development. Participants spoke of these sessions as having the ability to both “shatter” and “build” their confidence.

There were other nuances and sub-themes that emerged from the student focus groups that are not included here. The themes presented, along with the ways in which the interaction supported the construction of particular issues and understandings, were chosen to demonstrate the value of engaging students in course redesign and development. The focus groups were able to achieve an understanding of student perceptions as well as something of the why behind these perceptions. Students expressed their appreciation for being involved in the focus groups, concluding with encouragement to continue involving students in processes to improve courses and the quality of the teaching and learning environment for future students.

IMPLEMENTED CHANGES TO THE ART OF VETERINARY MEDICINE II

Keeping in mind the overall course learning objectives, findings from the focus groups were incorporated in significant changes to the delivery of AVM II in the subsequent year. Specifically, 15 of the 23 lectures (65%) offered in the course were replaced. The lectures retained were those viewed by the student focus-group participants as engaging and/or by the incoming course coordinator as having educational impact. Lectures that were commonly identified across the student focus groups as ineffective or perceived as irrelevant were either redesigned or replaced to try to better engage students while addressing relevant course learning objectives. Further, the new course coordinator assumed responsibility for teaching 11 of the 23 lectures (in comparison to 2 of 23 lectures in the previous year), notably reducing the number of one-time guest lectures in the course. Because the student focus groups had identified the need for lecture content to be relevant to their role as future veterinarians, lectures that were redesigned or added to the course were purposely developed to address course learning objectives in a way that was relevant to the veterinary context (e.g., empathy taught as a general relationship-building skill was replaced with empathy taught as a relationship-building skill that can be used to facilitate difficult discussions, such as talking to clients about money). Specifically, the ethics lectures that received a lot of negative attention during the student focus groups were redesigned to reduce the theoretical content of the lectures and increase the practical application of ethics theory and ethical decision making in a way that would be relevant to students’ future roles as veterinary practitioners.

The design and delivery of three two-hour tutorials taught in the course were remarkably changed based on feedback gained from the student focus groups. In the previous year, these tutorials were delivered to groups of 27 or 28 students. Two tutorials were presented in a primarily didactic format with assignments at the conclusion and a third tutorial was presented as a large group interview (potentially involving 27 to 28 students) of one simulated client. During this activity, students were invited and encouraged to each take a turn interacting with the simulated client in front of their peers. Student feedback for the two tutorials delivered in a didactic format was that
they constituted “busy work.” Although students did not appreciate the group size in the third tutorial, many of the participants in the focus groups felt that the third tutorial had the potential to be an effective and engaging exercise for students. Upon reflection, the course coordinator viewed this activity as a potentially effective way of breaking down communication into its component parts through a small-group interactive exercise that would support several course learning objectives related to the development of students’ clinical communication skills. As a result, the following year the didactic tutorials were discontinued and replaced with an extension of the third tutorial which was redesigned into the equivalent of three one-hour tutorials for each student. The redeveloped tutorials involved groups of six to seven students tasked with integrating the stages of a clinical workup with the stages of a clinical interview (involving one simulated client per group) across the three sessions. Within these tutorials each student was provided with the opportunity to interact with the simulated client while being supported and observed by a small number of peers.

The simulated-client labs associated with the course constituted one area that generally received positive feedback from the student focus groups. One concern raised across focus groups was the evaluation component associated with these labs and the simulated clients’ inconsistent marking. In an effort to create a safer learning environment in which students’ focus can be on development rather than evaluation, the simulated-client evaluation component was removed from these labs. Students were still assessed on their performance in the labs through an independent video-review assignment of their simulated-client interaction and a peer coaching and feedback assignment associated with the lab.

The final change to the course from 2007–2008 to 2008–2009 was the introduction of a weekly critical reflection log and a meta-analysis of these reflections to be handed in at the end of the course. The critical reflection logs were designed to encourage students to explore their thoughts critically on several topics relevant to the practice of veterinary medicine (e.g., healthy euthanasia, work-life balance, animals as chattels, etc.). This assignment was viewed by the course coordinator to align well with several course learning objectives and it was used to replace a writing assignment from the previous year that the students found the course more valuable and supportive of their professional skills and identities.

Subsequent end-of-term course evaluations for the 2008–2009 year (Figure 1) showed a marked improvement in student ratings of the relevance and quality of the course. Of 111 students, 90 completed the course evaluation. Only one student rated the course as less than adequate in meeting its objectives. As well, 91% rated the course content as average or above average, in comparison to the 35% who rated it as average or above average the year before. The Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney two-sample test showed a significant difference (p < .001) between students’ ratings of course content in 2007–2008 and 2008–2009 ratings. Informal feedback also suggests that students found the course more valuable and supportive of their professional development.

**DISCUSSION**

The findings from the focus groups strongly support research related to the creation of effective teaching and learning environments that (1) promote a deep approach to learning where students are actively involved and seek further meaning and understanding through application, practice, questioning, problem solving, and reflection; (2) provide organization and structure through clearly established goals, objectives, and standards; (3) appropriately align learning objectives, teaching and learning activities, and assessment strategies; and (4) keep students intrinsically motivated by establishing personal and real-world relevance, providing opportunities for independence and choice, and providing opportunities to receive frequent formative feedback.14,31–42

Understanding student perceptions plays an important role in making informed decisions regarding curriculum development.15 As a result of the information and understanding obtained through the student focus groups, AVM II was redesigned to better meet student needs and learning needs. However, the purpose of obtaining student perceptions is not to conform to all student expectations but to understand those expectations so that they can be addressed and managed in meeting course learning objectives and the presentation of course content. As well, the insight into where students’ uncertainties and lack of confidence lie can be used to create courses and environments that better support the development of their professional skills and identities.

The value of engaging students in course redesign and development in this case was clear, the effort having risen from the obvious need to respond to negative feedback from students. Using the insight and direction gained from the student focus groups, lectures, tutorials, simulated-client labs, assignments, and student assessment were substantially redesigned. This learner-centered approach to gathering feedback regarding the design and delivery of AVM II engaged students in their own and in future students’ learning process. Students acknowledged and appreciated this approach, recommending that it be maintained and expanded to other courses.

One limitation of this method of obtaining student feedback was that it is more resource intensive than end-of-course surveys, requiring faculty initiative and follow-through. Course redesign is not a matter of implementing all student suggestions, but students do need to see that their feedback has been considered. Course redesign is an ongoing, reflective process through which obtaining formative feedback is integrated into course delivery and subsequent changes are evaluated and tweaked. The following year of teaching AVM II brought additional alterations. Although many of the changes that followed the focus groups were retained, a few more lectures were replaced or changed.

Administrators interested in using focus groups for course redesign and development should be aware that students might not always feel comfortable openly sharing feedback on a course if they know the course administrator will have access to their comments. In the current study we attempted to minimize this impact by distancing the
course coordinator from direct involvement in data collection and de-identifying the written transcripts of students’ comments before sharing them with the course coordinator. Even if these steps are taken it is possible that students might withhold important feedback. Students might also be influenced by social desirability, providing feedback based on what they feel the course administrator is looking for rather than feedback that they would otherwise offer. These challenges can potentially be minimized by enlisting the assistance of an experienced moderator who creates a safe environment for students to share their feedback and ensures that students’ feedback is not influenced by leading questions or the actions of the moderator himself or herself. Further, in the example used in this article, the course coordinator was very interested in changing AVM II and incorporating student feedback in that refinement. In the hands of another course administrator, the changes implemented and the subsequent end-of-year course evaluation might have been different.

In deciding to use focus groups in course evaluation, the extent and need for change must be considered. The same substantial benefits might not be observed when a course is performing well and the need for redesign is less pressing. We maintain, however, that even for a course with positive course evaluations, focus groups are a method of gaining new insight and ideas for making small changes to keep students and instructors engaged. Although focus groups are not necessarily needed every year, they do contribute a deeper understanding of how a course is being delivered and received from a student perspective. Without being able to engage students, our efforts in teaching are lost. Hearing directly from students about what they need and find engaging in terms of both content (i.e., information) and process (i.e., delivery) can be tremendously valuable.

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<th>Key questions, follow-up probes, and follow-up prompts</th>
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<td>Purpose of AVM courses</td>
<td>What do you believe is the purpose of the AVM courses?</td>
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<td>• Why are they part of the DVM curriculum?</td>
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<td>• How do they fit into your preparation for being a veterinarian?</td>
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<td>Likes about AVM II</td>
<td>What was one thing you liked about the AVM II course?</td>
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<td>• Or it could be a topic of particular interest or importance</td>
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<td>How did this part of the course contribute to your learning?</td>
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<td>• What was it that made this part of the course so effective?</td>
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<td>Areas to improve AVM II</td>
<td>Where do you feel improvements could be made to the AVM II course?</td>
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<td>• Or it could be how the course could better support your needs</td>
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<td>• How did this part of the course make you feel?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What thoughts do you have on how this part or area of the course could be improved?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggested changes to improve AVM II</td>
<td>Drawing on your own background and experiences, what changes would you suggest to AVM II if you were to redesign the course?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• This may involve building on a piece of the course that already exists or introducing an entirely new approach</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

AVM = Art of Veterinary Medicine  
DVM = Doctor of Veterinary Medicine