



Qual Col

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Faster and better reports with online bulletin boards

As a user of bulletin boards, I often find the eventual analysis and report-writing stage to be inefficient. Having already read the participants' responses while moderating the group, it seems needlessly repetitive to do so again in the analysis.

From now on, however, it seems that I will be able to complete reports that are, arguably, better, and do so more quickly and more efficiently than before – thanks to new tools available from providers of online bulletin board facilities. These tools are tags and annotations.

BULLETIN BOARDS

An online bulletin board is an asynchronous research tool that allows moderators and respondents to communicate via messages left on a virtual bulletin board. The moderator leaves one or more messages (questions), which the participants read and answer when they log on to the board. The moderator also logs on periodically, reads the participants' responses and probes for clarification or expansion, as required. The process of leaving questions, answers and probes continues for the duration of the bulletin board (typically from three to five days).

Bulletin boards offer many benefits. Since the exchanges are asynchronous, participants can access the research at a time and place that is best for them (a boon for international research, research

across time-zones, and research with busy participants). Further, participants have the luxury of reading and considering the questions and their answers, generally resulting in highly detailed feedback.

TAGS

Tags can be thought of as open-ended codes. The researcher can create any number of tags (e.g., “positive,” “negative,” “quotable”) and attach these tags to the statements of respondents. The tags are visible only to the moderator and can be used either as reminders for followup actions during the discussion (e.g., “probe further”) or to flag comments for the subsequent analysis (e.g., “quotable comment”).

Tags become part of the record and can be downloaded as part of the transcript. As a result, the researcher can sort, filter and group participant comments according to the analytic scheme that already started taking shape at the moderating stage.

The introduction of tags, alone, would be cause for analytic rejoicing. But there's more: online facility providers have also introduced annotations, another tool to simplify and aid analysis.

ANNOTATIONS

Annotations are the digital equivalent of marginal notes to oneself. They allow the researcher to begin the process of reflection,

even as the group discussion unfolds. These annotations are inserted, invisibly, into the record of the bulletin board and are downloaded, like tags, along with the transcript.

Depending on the provider, annotations are treated as invisible messages or, as in the case of Itracks, as part of the tagging process. In the Itracks implementation, each instance of a tag can support an annotation. Note also that multiple tagging is allowed, and that multiple tags are flagged with individually coloured squares.

CONCLUSIONS

Tags and annotations promise to reduce the time and effort required for analysis and report writing in bulletin board research. Since the moderator must, in any event, read each participant's comments in order to determine whether any followup probe is required, it makes sense to use the tagging feature during the moderating portion of the bulletin board – to help ensure that the analysis will include all on-the-fly insights, and that it will focus on the most relevant comments emanating from the discussion.

At least three major bulletin board software providers now offer tags and annotations as part of their software: Itracks (www.itracks.com), Lidlow (www.lidlow.com), and Qualboard (www.qualboard.com).

Our profession has attracted and developed, and continues to profit from, a creative class.

Pierre Bélisle is a seasoned qualitative researcher with a special interest in online qualitative. His blog, virtual qualitative, is at <http://pbelisle.blogspot.com>.