

CTL Master's Project, 795  
Greg Nielsen  
*Hiroshima*  
Focus Group Findings

Focus Group: Saturday, March 13, 2010  
University of Nevada, Reno – Joe Crowley Student Union  
Noon, Room 406

There were five participants, three women and two men. There were six focus questions given to the participants. They saw the questions for the first time at the beginning of the session.

**Questions 1: How do you feel about the *Hiroshima* screenplay and project?**

Participant 1: She liked the way the story blended with the history so you didn't realize that you were learning history. She liked how the characters really came alive.

Participant 2: She expressed her answer by stating that it showed how history is repeating itself all over again with the film's theme of racism. It was hard for her to believe that we thought of the Japanese like we did especially in light of the way we see them today. Now they are our allies and economic friends. Many of our Japanese-Americans are our best students. We depend on them for their expertise in a variety of areas including math, science and technology. The film made her think about how we feel about a Pakistani, an Arab, and a Saudi now. She compared the racism now by saying "we are right back where we were with the profiling then."

Participant 1 agreed by saying, "That's true."

Participant 2 went on to talk about how we are in a similar place today with all the violence.

Participant 1: She interjected that the racism toward the Japanese was based on how they looked.

Participant 3: She commented how she thought *Hiroshima* was a really good learning tool evidenced by how it was easy to make the leap from then to our current world situation. She shared her view that Americans feel “morally justified” in fighting in World War II. However, she shared that in many ways current historical information and the film (*Hiroshima*) shows we were not morally justified in every instance.

Participant 4: I found the story was a “tough thing to get through” because of the difficult topic. Yet, he was quick to add that it was an important story and one that needed to be told.

**Question 2: What went through your head as you read and/or reviewed *Hiroshima*?**

Participant 5: He responded by remembering what the late comedian George Carlin said, “Americans are really good at bombing people with skin that’s not our color.”

Participant 2: She shared her view on the writing. She is a professional writer and noticed that from a technical point of view the writing was excellent. As a screenwriter, she could not help but judge some of the mechanics of the story as she was reading. For her, the story started out a little bit slow, but as it went on it picked up speed until about a third of the way through she turned the pages faster and faster in order to find out what happened. She compared the pace to a speeding train.

Participant 5: He agreed with Participant 2 by saying, “Exactly.”

Participant 2: When she was reading the script, she was on an airplane. She stopped reading when she arrived at her destination, but stated how she could not wait to pick up

where she left off. She commented on the mechanics of the screenplay by saying that it was written “very, very tight.” She said that the inciting incident, the set ups and payoffs and the turning points were all there. She went on to say that without a good story it doesn’t matter what great facts you have the story will not work.

Participant 1: She responded to Participant 2’s comment by saying that she really liked the realism and that the story did not shy away from the reality. She liked the love story, but at the same time liked the fact that the story did not get caught up in fluff. At times, she expressed it was difficult to read some of the reality parts, but she noted, “It really added a lot to the story.”

Participant 2: She was horrified by some of the torture scenes, especially with the character of Captain Wayne who had the water hose shoved down his stomach. She said that there was no way she could sit through that scene in a theatre. She commented that she could hardly read that scene and that in a theatre she would close her eyes. She emphasized that the Captain Wayne torture scene was really “upsetting.”

Participant 3: She said that for her the story really “contextualized” the history and showed that it was in many ways really a “cultural war.” She went on to say that the story was historically informative even if a person did not really know much about the times. She pointed out that even for someone who knew quite a bit about the history that they would probably learn a lot that they did not know before. She stated that the film really captured an expanse of time and place and how certain things happened in time and place that came together to bring about historical events.

Participant 4: He jumped in by saying that it was really important to him that the film did not focus on who was right and who was wrong, but stayed with the facts. As a result, he

felt that the audience could decide for themselves what they thought was right or wrong. He said that often movies like *Hiroshima* could become preachy which tends to interrupt the audiences, “suspension of disbelief” and then the audience is out of the movie.

**Questions 3: What struck you most about *Hiroshima*? (Positive and/or Negative)**

Participant 4: For him what stood out the most on the positive was that there were two very different people from two very different parts of the world. He pointed out that even though their two countries were at war, they were in love with each other. He liked how the film showed two people from two different cultures loving each other despite what was going on in the world. He liked the film’s statement about love being supreme in the midst of killing and torture.

Participant 2: She responded to this question by pointing out one thing that did not really work for her in the story. The fact that the chauffeur exposed Sadeo as a spy seemed too coincidental. It was hard for her to believe that the chauffeur actually traveled with the family to American in the first place. She encouraged the possibility of finding other ways for the main character to be found out that were more believable.

Participant 1: She found the ending to be a total surprise; she did not see it coming.

Participant 5: “Yes.”

Participant 1: She loved how the end honored the American side of things while, at the same time, honoring the Japanese side. She believed throughout the film that the two lovers would end up together and Setsu would not go along with the arranged marriage. But after Sadeo’s death, she does go along with the arranged marriage honoring her

Japanese tradition. Yet, at the end of the movie, she tells her grandson the story honoring the American side.

Participant 3: For her, the one thing that really stuck out about the film was the theme, the theme of race. Because she said she was raised to accept people the way they are, she really doesn't think in a racial way. The film showed that during that time race and what culture you were from determined everything. She felt the film communicated that well.

**Question 4: What did you learn by reading and/or reviewing *Hiroshima*?**

Participant 3: She learned that way more people survived the blast than she knew. She thought that maybe 10 or 15 people survived and that everyone else died instantly. She was impressed with how much she learned about what happened after the bombed exploded. She recalled in school (high school) that projects were encouraged on Pearl Harbor and discouraged on Hiroshima because Pearl Harbor was our rallying point.

Participant 2: She didn't know that so many people died. Reading the film made her realize that we have an antiseptic view of the bomb going off. Now she has a much better understanding of why the father of the A bomb, Oppenheimer, literally went nuts.

Participant 3: "Yes, he went insane."

Participant 4: She understood after reading *Hiroshima* why he went crazy. She said that when she was a kid she thought that the bomb went off, everybody died, it ended the war and that was the end of it. She never thought about all the suffering that happened afterward like living through the radiation poisoning, the burning and the running to the river to get some relief from the pain. The film really brought out the human suffering that resulted.

Participant 1: I liked how the film showed the lighting of the candles and that there is today an honoring of the memory of those who died and those who survived.

**Question 5: In your view, did *Hiroshima* succumb or avoid “presentism?”**

**Presentism was defined as “the act of viewing the past through the lens of the present.”**

Participant 5: He expressed that he learned a lot from the script. He noticed that it was not written contemporarily, but how it was back then. He felt that it was written in the language of that time and brought out the attitudes and prejudices then. He believed that it is hard for writers to do and they don't do it very often.

Participant 3: She thought that “presentism” was largely avoided. She stated that while reading the script she was constantly reminded that it was a different time and that it was not like how she grew up. She said that she could feel the different values of that time.

Participant 2: She agreed with Participant 3 except that a few times she was jolted out of that time by dialog that did not ring true. She thought some of the dialog was too colloquial and jolted her into the present. She suggested that it be corrected because it threatens the film's point of view leading to presentism.

Participant 5: He noticed that the dialog has improved over several drafts and that it has been corrected.

Participant 2: She clarified her point by saying that she was being picky and that she only felt it happened three or four times.

Participant 3: She felt that the dialog for the most part was adequate. She realized that the dialog was from that time in history. She thought the way they spoke was interesting and very different than today.

Participant 4: He thought that presentism was mostly avoided and that it's often not the case in other World War II films.

**Question 6: Do you have an additional thoughts or insights?**

Participant 5: He thought Participant 2's thoughts and insights were excellent. The film showed me a lot of dimensions in both plot and character.

Participant 2: She concluded by saying that she kept thinking that the goal of the project was to get the script sold, made and marketed. With the way films are made being in a total state of flux, she asked herself, "What is the forum for this film?" She wondered if it could be a big budget Hollywood film without the story being gutted, sensationalizing it and bringing presentism into it. She thought that it would be better made authentically as an Indie film with a budget under 20 million.

Participant 4: He recalled in learning to write film that the screenwriter needs to keep in mind what the film will cost. He thought it was possible that another rewrite could bring the budget below 10 million. Having taken a videography class, he knows how important it is to think about the film's budget. He could see shooting many scenes in a studio in order to keep the cost down.

Participant 3: She agreed with Participant 2 that a big budget Hollywood, glossy production would probably lose the nitty gritty of the film.

Participant 1: She stated that *Hiroshima* was the first film script that she has every read. She was amazed that there are so many things to think about when writing and producing a screenplay.

### **The Participants:**

Participant 1: She is a retired teacher in her mid-fifties. She has a grown daughter and two grandchildren. She is an avid reader. She has a Master's degree in education. She has a small business teaching deaf children.

Participant 2: She is in her mid-forties and married with three children. She is a professional writer and editor. One of her films received national recognition by placing in the top ten in a screenwriting contest. More than 4,000 films were entered in the contest.

Participant 3: She is recent graduate from University of Nevada, Reno and is 22 years old. She loves to watch films and has worked in local movie theaters. She is single and an artist. She has traveled extensively and speaks Spanish.

Participant 4: He is a graduate of UNR. He is in his early 30s, married and has one child. He works full-time and goes to school. He is a budding screenwriter who has written one script.

Participant 5: He is 70 years old, retired and has an advanced degree from Oregon University. He was an intelligence officer in the U.S. military and owned and operated his own business before retiring twenty years ago.

**Insights:**

The focus group provided me additional thoughts and insights into my project. For example, the constructive suggestions on plot points and dialog will be very useful when writing the 9<sup>th</sup> draft. It seemed clear from the participant's responses that the realism, authenticity, story and historical context largely worked. If I were to do another focus group, I would ask follow up questions in order to gain even more insights. I thought that the group's consensus was that I ought to market the screenplay to an independent producer in order to retain the spirit of the project. I took this to heart and will head exclusively in that direction.

**Participant's Feedback:**

Participant 2 expressed how much she enjoyed the focus group and how mentally stimulating an experience it was for her. She said she wished it lasted longer.

Participant 1 enjoyed the gathering and felt she learned not only about the history surrounding the dropping of the first atomic bomb but about what goes into writing a screenplay.

Participant 5: He said he hadn't been in a room with that many smart, articulate people like those in the focus group for a decade.

**Further Reflections:**

After further reflection, there are number of other thoughts, insights, viewpoints, considerations and possibilities that shed light on developing the Hiroshima project into a produced screenplay.

Uppermost in my mind, is the reaction that a Japanese audience may have after watching the film. To date, I have only had one Japanese person read the script. She lives in Japan and is the twin sister of a friend who lives in Reno. She is a English subtitle writer for Japanese films. The feedback she gave me was interesting. She did not comment on any of the film's themes – love vs. duty, racism and the horrors of war. Instead, she focused exclusively on cultural points like incorrect male and female names, the cultural context of flowers and the prohibitive expense of producing such a film. The focus group did not take up the Japanese perspective other than to mention that the film did not seem to take any one side, but rather allowed the audience to decide for themselves on the merits of the historical parts of the story.

Over the last four years, I have made an effort to have other Japanese people read *Hiroshima*. I asked my Japanese piano teacher of nine years to read it; she avoided the topic in a polite way. I contacted by phone and email the Japanese theater group at the University of Nevada, Reno and they did not return my communications. I made several attempts to ask for some input, insight, suggestions and guidance from the Japanese Club on the UNR campus. Each attempt was politely avoided. I suspect it has to do with the shame based, save face Japanese culture. In my opinion, I doubt that a Japanese filmmaker coming from a deeply rooted Japanese heritage will tackle the disturbing feelings brought up by *Hiroshima*.

However, Japanese-American, Steven Okazaki, wrote and produced the best documentary I have seen to date on Hiroshima, *White Light, Black Rain*, 2007. He skillfully weaves current Japanese culture along with the historical footage and well-researched information creating a stark, fair and thought provoking production. At the

beginning of the film, he captures the denial about what happened in 1945. He asks several youth culture Japanese teens who live in Hiroshima, “What happened in Hiroshima in the 1945?” None of them said anything about the dropping of the first atomic bomb. One guessed that maybe there was an earthquake.

There is no shortage of ignorance and denial in the American culture as well. I wrote in my Hiroshima Reflection Paper, “I was stunned to find out that people survived the atomic explosion. I had held the false belief that every one in Hiroshima, Japan died that gruesome day.” Two of the Focus Group participants commented on their lack of historical awareness. Participant 3: She learned that way more people survived the blast than she knew. She thought that maybe 10 or 15 people survived and that everyone else died instantly. She was impressed with how much she learned about what happened after the bombed exploded. Participant 2: She didn’t know that so many people died. Reading the film, made her realize that we have an antiseptic view of the bomb going off. Now she has a much better understanding of why the father of the A bomb, Oppenheimer, literally went nuts.

Another consideration that the focus group seemed to have a consensus on was the emphasis on producing the film independently. Since I first conceived, researched wrote and rewrote the screenplay in 2006, the film community and business has gone through a major change. Not only is there less big budget money for first time writers and productions, the film community has moved away from the exclusive “Hollywood” film. Today, low budget films like the 2010 Academy Award film, *The Hurt Locker* (for Best Picture) and *Little Miss Sunshine*, 2006, winner of the Academy Award for best

original screenplay, are independent films that have found wide national and international audiences.

As the Japanese reader pointed out, *Hiroshima* in its present form, requires numerous shooting locations driving up the budget. Remarkable as it may seem, even Academy Award winning directors like Francis Ford Coppola – *The Godfather* – in a recent interview commented on the fact that he cannot get the kind of financing for his films like he did years ago. As a result, he has decided to return to his film making roots as a USC film student and focus exclusively on independent, lower budget productions. *Youth without Youth* and *Tetro*, his last two films, were both made independently of the Hollywood studio system.

Since the focus group met in March, I have given a lot of thought to a 9<sup>th</sup> rewrite. In the next draft, I plan to focus on reducing the number of locations, seeing more scenes filmed on a sound stage and trimming scenes, all without sacrificing the spirit of the story. In order to achieve this, I will take out the Harvard, Boston and Pearl Harbor scenes. I will increase the emphasis on the Japanese internment and weave in the back-story, which is now part of the story, by what happens at the internment camp.

Participant 2 brought up the torture scenes with Captain Wayne. She was disturbed by reading them and felt that they would be difficult to watch on screen. While writing the film, I spent many long hours thinking about whether or not to include any torturing. In reality, the torturing was far worse than I wrote it in the script. Still, I am taking her feelings into consideration on the next re-write. My intention in including the torture scenes was to build up to the horrific destruction that was unleashed by the A-bomb. Yes, the Japanese military could be barbaric. But the barbarism of the A-bomb

dropped by the American military was, in many ways, even more horrific. The blast's aftermath was difficult to write. I did not want to be over sensational. I did want to be authentic and show what happened without being excessive in the context of the story.

The Focus Group participants did not bring up the English subtitling. This surprised me. Many film goers do not like subtitles especially in the United States. In 1990, the Academy Award for Best Picture, *Dances with Wolves*, made an historical breakthrough. The main character, Lt. John Dunbar, becomes neighbors with a Sioux tribe. He overcomes the language barrier by actively learning the Sioux language. As he learns a new language, the audience hears the indigenous Sioux tongue while simultaneously seeing the English subtitles at the bottom of the big screen.

In 2006, another film milestone was reached with the release of Clint Eastwood's *Letters from Iwo Jima*. For the first time, an entire major Hollywood motion picture was shown in U.S. theaters in a foreign language (Japanese) with English subtitles. The film was nominated for several Oscars including Best Picture, Best Director and Best Original Screenplay. The total U.S. theatrical gross was nearly \$14,000,000, a respectable number considering the U.S. audience's aversion to subtitles. Interestingly, U.S. DVD sales to date are approximately \$14,000,000 matching the box office gross. The International gross (outside the U.S.) is more than \$55,000,000 (<http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/2006/LFIJM.php>).

I was aware of these trends when I wrote *Hiroshima*. I felt the timing was right to be more authentic in language. In recent years, the globalization and multicultural trends have opened more people up to other cultures. On the other hand, by having the two

main characters fluent in both Japanese and English I thought moviegoers could have more of a balanced experience.

Finally, the Focus Group prompted me to think more about the issue of presentism. Despite the fact that the group consensus was that *Hiroshima* largely avoided the tendency to see the past through the lens of the present, I am not that convinced. I think I was sincere in my effort to be authentic to the historical period. Still, I did not live through those times. I can only do my best to put myself into the shoes of those who lived in Hiroshima, in the Japanese internment camps and in the U.S. during World War II. True, I wanted to avoid presentism as much as possible and I believe I did to some degree.

Along these lines, I recall pitching *Hiroshima* to a producer in 2008. After the pitch, he asked me if it was based on a true story. I confessed that it was not. Nevertheless, I walked away satisfied that *Hiroshima* invoked the feeling of authenticity.