

FOCUS GROUPS: A Strategic Tool for Discovery and Assessment



Presented by

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What Is A Focus Groups?

- ◆ A qualitative research method
 - Open-ended responses, textual analysis
 - Different from surveys with fixed responses
- ◆ Carefully-planned group discussions
 - Created for a well-defined purpose
 - Produce large amounts of data in a short period of time
- ◆ Designed to obtain people's perceptions
 - Learn a great deal about experiences and opinions
 - Learn little about any individual or the general population

Use Focus Groups When ...

- ◆ You want to understand gaps between groups of people
- ◆ You want to investigate complex behavior and motivations
- ◆ You want to understand diversity
- ◆ You need a friendly, respectful research method
- ◆ You want to test reactions to products or services

Do NOT Use Focus Groups When ...

- ◆ You need statistical information
- ◆ You are working with emotionally charged or sensitive issues
- ◆ You can't ensure confidentiality
- ◆ You want people to come to a consensus

Ethical Issues for Focus Groups

- ◆ Confidentiality (not anonymity)
- ◆ Privacy among participants
- ◆ Encourage people to “pass” or leave if they are uncomfortable

Four Steps of Focus Groups

1. Planning the Focus Group
2. Developing Questions
3. Moderating the Focus Group
4. Analyzing and Reporting Data

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1. *Planning the Focus Group*
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Step One: Planning the Focus Group

Overview

- ◆ Begin with end in mind
- ◆ Formulate research question very carefully
- ◆ Choose participants thoughtfully
- ◆ Always conduct a pilot group first

Step One: Planning the Focus Group

Types of Research Questions

- ◆ Problem Identification Question
What are the strengths and weaknesses of academic advising?
- ◆ Planning Question
What can be done to improve academic advising?
- ◆ Implementation Question
How can the new advising center best be marketed to students?
- ◆ Assessment Question
Is the new advising center meeting the needs of students?

Step One: Planning the Focus Group

Guidelines

- ◆ Typical group size: 6-10 participants
- ◆ Typical number of groups: 3-5
- ◆ Typical length of session: 90 minutes
- ◆ Using only one group is very risky
- ◆ Goal is to reach redundancy

Step One: Planning the Focus Group

Logistics

- ◆ Ensure room setup promotes discussion
- ◆ Plan for use of tape recorder (or video recorder)
- ◆ Consider offering refreshments and incentives
- ◆ Provide name badges (first name only)

Step One: Planning the Focus Group Personnel

- ◆ Participants
 - Homogeneous within groups
 - Segmentation among groups
 - Allow for no-shows
- ◆ Moderator
- ◆ Assistant Moderator

Four Steps of Focus Groups

1. Planning the Focus Group
2. ***Developing Questions***
3. Moderating the Focus Group
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Step Two: Developing Questions

GUIDELINES

- ◆ Be clear, brief, focused
- ◆ Be jargon-free
- ◆ Pilot the questions
- ◆ Revise based on feedback
- ◆ Assign time limit to each question

Step Two: Developing Questions

FIVE TYPES OF QUESTIONS

1. Opening question
2. Introductory question
3. Transition question
4. Key questions
5. Ending question

Step Two: Developing Questions

OPENING QUESTION

- ◆ Quick (30 second) question that all participants answer
- ◆ Based on fact, not opinion
- ◆ Usually not analyzed
- ◆ Identifies characteristics participants have in common

*What is your name
and your major?*

Step Two: Developing Questions

INTRODUCTORY QUESTION

- ◆ Introduces the general topic of discussion
- ◆ Fosters conversation
- ◆ May be definition, explanation, experience
- ◆ Use what, how, when
- ◆ Avoid yes/no answers

What was your first impression of the Writing Center?

Step Two: Developing Questions

TRANSITION QUESTION

- ◆ Moves the discussion toward the key topic
- ◆ Allow participants to become aware of others' views

How have you been involved with the Career Center?

Tell us about your advising experience this semester.

Step Two: Developing Questions

KEY QUESTIONS

- ◆ Usually 2-5 questions that drive the study
- ◆ Require greatest amount of time to create and to analyze
- ◆ May require use of probes or pauses

What is the most important role the Library has played in your academic career?

Suppose you were in charge of Dining Services for a day. What would you do?

Step Two: Developing Questions

ENDING QUESTIONS

- ◆ Asked after Asst Moderator summary
- ◆ Summary question

Do you have anything else to add to the summary I just provided?

- ◆ Final question

Is there anything else we should have talked about but didn't?

- ◆ "All things considered" question

Of all the things we discussed, which is most important to you?

GROUP ACTIVITY

Develop Focus Group Questions

Choose from one of these research topics:

- 1. How can our student health services be improved?*
- 2. Do potential employers find our students to be well-prepared for their job search?*
- 3. What characteristics of residence halls are important to students?*

Then create: *An opening question*
Two key questions

GROUP ACTIVITY

Develop Focus Group Questions

Opening Question:

Key Question #1:

Key Question #2:

Four Steps of Focus Groups

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Step Three: Moderating the Focus Group

GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF MODERATING

- ◆ Show respect for participants
- ◆ Be a moderator, NOT a participant
- ◆ Be emotionally detached
- ◆ Be a skillful listener

Step Three: Moderating the Focus Group

ROLE OF MODERATOR

During focus group:

- Create a welcoming atmosphere
- Establish ground rules
- Introduce questions at appropriate times
- Assure participants of confidentiality
- Exercise mild, unobtrusive control

After focus group:

- Debrief with assistant moderator
- Listen to taped transcript
- Prepare analysis and report

Step Three: Moderating the Focus Group

CHALLENGES OF MODERATOR

- ◆ Experts
- ◆ Dominant talkers
- ◆ Disruptive participants
- ◆ Ramblers
- ◆ Quiet or shy participants
- ◆ Inattentive participants

Step Three: Moderating the Focus Group

ROLE OF ASSISTANT MODERATOR

Before Focus Group:

- ◆ Check equipment
- ◆ Ensure proper room setup
- ◆ Handle paperwork
- ◆ Distribute nametags
- ◆ Monitor entrance, welcome participants

Step Three: Moderating the Focus Group

ROLE OF ASSISTANT MODERATOR

During Focus Group:

- ◆ Record discussion (most important task)
- ◆ Note body language, discussion climate
- ◆ Give oral summary

After Focus Group:

- ◆ Participate in debriefing
- ◆ Assist with analysis and report

Step Three: Moderating the Focus Group

GUIDELINES FOR RECORDING FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

- ◆ Draw focus group seating chart and name (or nickname) participants
- ◆ Organize questions in advance
- ◆ If using paper:
 - Divide page in half
 - Use left side for key points, follow-up questions
 - Use right side for direct quotes, body language
- ◆ If using computer:
 - Sit where typing will not be distracting

Four Steps of Focus Groups

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Step Four: Analyzing and Reporting Focus Group Data

GUIDELINES

- ◆ Analysis requires intuition, insight, inductive reasoning skills
- ◆ Results should directly answer research question
- ◆ Report should contain executive summary
- ◆ Report format and level of detail should be determined at beginning of project
- ◆ Researcher should avoid using numbers and generalizing to a larger population

Step Four: Analyzing and Reporting Focus Group Data

GUIDELINES

- ◆ Do analysis as soon as possible after focus group ends
- ◆ Compare data within a group and among groups
- ◆ Focus on responses to the key questions
- ◆ Look for patterns
- ◆ Consider what was NOT said
- ◆ Pay attention to frequency, extensiveness and intensity

Step Four: Analyzing and Reporting Focus Group Data

ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES

- ◆ “Long table” analysis
 - Low tech but effective
 - Make copies of transcript to cut up
 - ◆ Use difference color paper for each group
 - ◆ Use colored markers to distinguish participants
 - Categorize note cutouts by question, then theme
 - Write description summary
- ◆ Computer analysis
 - Similar process as “long table” but electronic
 - Use codes or highlighting to distinguish

Step Four: Analyzing and Reporting Focus Group Data

ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES

Streamlined debriefing analysis

- Use when time or resources are limited
- Performed by moderator and assistant moderator immediately following focus group
- Discuss major themes question by question
- Record results of discussion electronically
- Combine all focus group results into summary

GROUP ACTIVITY

Participate in a Mock Focus Group

We will simulate a portion of a focus group with the following research question:

How can we increase the response rate to our NSSE Survey?

- ◆ Some will participate in the focus group
- ◆ Others will serve as assistant moderator

How can we increase the response rate to our NSSE Survey?

- ◆ **What is your name, your major and your year in school? (*Opening*)**
- ◆ What is your impression of on-line surveys? (*Introductory*)
- ◆ What does the term "student engagement" mean to you? (*Transition*)
- ◆ **Tell us what might convince you to participate in NSSE. (*Key*)**
- ◆ **If the University made a donation to a charity for every student who responded to NSSE, how would that impact your decision to participate? (*Key*)**
- ◆ How can we communicate the importance of NSSE to our students? (*Key*)
- ◆ Do you have any other ideas about ways to increase student participation in NSSE? (*Ending*)

GROUP ACTIVITY

Participate in a Mock Focus Group

How can we increase the response rate to our NSSE Survey?

- ◆ What were the key findings?
- ◆ Did the participants demonstrate any non-verbal messages?
- ◆ Did you notice any moderator strategies?

QUESTIONS?

Remember:

IT'S *YOUR* FOCUS

BUT

THEIR GROUP

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SOURCES

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