

Focus Groups

A focus group can be defined as a group of individuals chosen by researchers to meet together at set times to discuss set topics in an organised manner and to make judgments on them. The discussion and judgment-making are guided by a group facilitator usually known as a 'moderator'.

The main purpose of focus groups is to draw upon respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions in a way in which would not be feasible using other methods of data-gathering, for example observation, one-to-one interviewing, or questionnaire surveys.

A key aspect of focus groups is an emphasis on organised discussion. It is, however, important to distinguish between focus groups and other forms of structured group interview. Any group interview will involve taking data from a number of people at the same time; but focus groups specifically rely on interaction within the group that is based on topics supplied by the researcher. Thus, the key benefit of focus groups is the insight and data produced by the interaction between participants. It is worth noting that Nominal Group Technique (Link to FB7) has similar benefits but with a structure that is more easily standardised.

In terms of evaluating teaching, modules or programmes, focus groups are particularly useful for:

- generating hypotheses about phenomena that seem to have no explanation
- generating possible solutions to problems – especially those that seem particularly intractable
- generating students suggestions for improvement

They are also useful for:

- obtaining insights into the different perspectives held by students
- observing how students are influenced by their peer group
- exploring the degree of consensus on a given topic
- gathering student opinion on potential changes
- gathering student opinion on changes after they have been made

As with all interviews, however, be careful not to assume that the opinions given are definitive. Respondents are speaking in a specific context and this can make it difficult to identify which judgments will remain static once the group session is over.

Setting up and managing a focus group

Focus groups probably work best if they consist of between six and ten participants but there is no hard and fast rule about this.

For some evaluations you might want to establish several parallel focus groups so that comparisons can be made. However, for educational evaluation it is probably more useful to have one group. This should meet several times (otherwise it is little different to a structured discussion) If possible, a neutral location should be used in order to avoid either negative or positive associations with a particular site or building (Powell & Single 1996).

Focus groups to function best when they have a skilful and effective 'moderator'. The moderator is responsible for:

- ensuring everyone understands the purpose and goals of the group,
- putting people at their ease, and
- facilitating effective interaction between group members.

Throughout the meeting moderators should promote debate by:

- asking open questions
- asking for clarification regarding particular contributions
- asking for details or examples
- moving things on when the conversation gets stuck or drifts
- keeping the discussion focussed
- ensuring everybody speaks

On the other hand, moderators must remain broadly neutral so as not to steer the group to a predetermined end.

For further reading see: *Social Research Update 19, Winter 1997, The University of Surrey*. <http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/sru/SRU19.html>