How to run focus groups

What are Focus Groups?

Focus groups are like interviews with a small group instead of one-to-one. The key difference between focus groups and interviews is that participant discussion is central to focus groups. A focus group *is* ***not*** *a focus group* if the interviewer asks all the questions and the group just answers like a big interview. It should be more dynamic than an interview because of the different viewpoints expressed by participants.

Why focus groups?

The **focus is on a topic**, allowing exploration of anything associated with the topic, rather than only the things the interviewer is interested in or had thought of in advance. Aspects of the topic of concern to the participants are more likely to be uncovered and explored in focus groups than in one-to-one interviews.

The **focus is also on the group**, and its own use of language and its own socially constructed view of things, rather than the interviewer’s own terminology and prior assumptions and beliefs. The focus group using their own language tends to result in insights being uncovered and explored gradually, in a way that staccato questioning often fails to elicit.

How big?

Traditionally **5-8**, in order to generate discussion between members with a diversity of perceptions and experiences. Smaller groups can work but require good facilitation skills to avoid it becoming back and forwards between interviewer and one participant at a time. By the time you are down to three it is very difficult to avoid it operating like a conventional interview.

How?

**Sit in a circle** so that everyone can see each other and easily address any and all the others. Move the furniture to suit you. Socialise before you sit down and start straight away as soon as you sit down, so that any initial silence is not associated with the seated circle.

**Introduce the focus and what a focus group is**: “*OK what we are here to talk about today is X. I am interested in X because...I hope you will all have plenty of chances to have your say. This isn’t an interview, it is a discussion. If it works you will be talking with each other, not talking to me, and I will be listening in. My main role is to keep us discussing around the focus and to avoid us getting distracted by other interesting topics”*

**Get the group talking to each other** and responding to each other and triggering each other off, disagreeing with each other, taking responsibility to introduce new sub-topics they have chosen, and so on. The interviewer is a facilitator of this discussion rather than ‘in charge’.

Ethics

You should explain about **confidentiality** (e.g. “Your teachers do not know who is here and no-one will be identified by name in any document or orally to anyone outside the group”) and gain their permission if any record is kept, a transcript made, or aspects of a transcript used in a report of any kind. You may need a signed copy of an agreement form from each participant. If you can hand round a form explaining this, for them to read and sign, before you sit down, then you can get straight down to discussion.

How long?

**Allow an hour,** tell the group they have an hour, and manage the time to make sure you cover a range of topics and have time to finish up tidily. If the whole thing falls horribly flat it is OK to abandon, but do it politely: **“***We seem to have got through everything really quickly*

*so we can finish early, thank you***.”** Not **“***Well that was hopeless, I’m off”.*

Questions

Have enough questions to kick things off but not a long list you feel you need to ‘get through’. After your initial question or prompt you should act largely to keep the focus rather than to ask questions. Let it run a bit, but don’t be afraid to interrupt digressions by saying **“***So what we are focussing on here is ....”* to bring people back to the central issue. Traditional focus groups last two hours so as to allow plenty of time for digressions without having to interrupt the flow.

Use open questions such as *“Please tell me/ Let’s hear a bit more about how you....”,* which prompts reflection and description, rather than closed questions such as *“Did you...?”* to which the answer could be just “No”.

Involving everybody

If one group member has spoken on a particular sub-topic, but others do not add anything, use questions to the others such as **“***What* *other examples of that kind of thing have you come across?” , “Is it always like that?”* or just **“***What do others think about that?”*It is important to check that what one person says is not atypical (and if it comes from a dominant or very confident group member it might well be atypical). There may be two contrasting views within the group and you need to uncover both of them.

Follow-up questions

If you think you have bumped into something important, say so, and explore it in more depth:*“This seems important, can we spend a bit more time on this?”*rather than just skimming on to the next thing and discovering afterwards that your transcript on that topic is a bit thin.

You are trying to get at how they think so ask *“Why do you do that?”* or *“Can you explain why that happens?”* Don’t be afraid to say *“I don’t understand that, can you explain it to me a bit more please”*

You are also trying to get at how they feel, so it is OK to simply ask, in response to something someone has said *“When that happens, how does that feel?”*or **“How do you all feel about that?”**

It is OK to explore your hunches e.g. *“Is seems as if.....have I got that right?”*but not often.

Getting it right

A transcript of a good focus group would have the following characteristics:

* It is mostly what group members said, with very little said by the interviewer
* It includes most of the group members saying things, and each quite often, not just a few dominant ones doing all the talking
* Statements by one member are followed by statements from others, ideally in a long sequence, without the interviewer interfering.
* Most of it is ‘on target’ and related to the focus of the group.
* Insightful statements are long enough, and detailed enough, that they can stand on their own to illustrate what it is about, without explication
* There are several statements about each sub-topic which together provide a richer picture, rather than just one statement about each.
* A wide range of sub-topics are explored, rather than only one or two.
* It is surprising: if it isn’t then you have probably not explored the focus in much depth.

Problem-shooting

Things that can go wrong include:

* One or two members of the group are over-dominant. It’s OK to interrupt and say *“Thanks for that, now can we hear what the others have to say”* or *“It’s important to get a wide range of views here, so let’s explore your perceptions”* (turning away from the dominant one). If you can spot the dominant one in advance, sit next to them rather than opposite them, so they are cut out of your gaze and have to face other members. Never be rude or show favouritism – it will wreck the focus group there and then.
* One or two participants are reticent and silent. Make sure you write down everyone’s name during the introduction, and be prepared to say, *I haven’t heard from you, X. What do you think about this issue? What examples of this issue have cropped up in your experience?* It is sometimes worth doing a ‘round’ to get everyone’s perception of an issue either to sum up or at a key stage in the focus group, when there is disagreement or when the topic needs further unpacking.
* One topic (sometimes the very first one raised) gets thrashed to death at the expense of all other possible topics. It’s OK to say *“Thanks, I’ve got a really good feel for that issue, now let’s move on”*
* You don’t understand what they are talking about. It’s OK to say **“***I’m not sure I’ve got this, can you explain it to me a bit?”*
* No-one responds to a question or prompt at all. This may be because it is a poorly worded question or an unimportant question. It may be because it is tricky to think about or talk about. If you are convinced it is important but people are having trouble opening up about it, try rephrasing the question. If you are really stuck, then try telling them how you experience what you are asking them about (a personal anecdote) to model what you are hoping they might say. But don’t do this often and don’t lead too much. In extremis, ask them to write down their thoughts about it, and then share their thoughts privately with one other person, then come back into the whole group. This usually unearths all kinds of thoughts they might otherwise have kept to themselves. Don’t let a silence hang on too long – but several seconds silence is good for reflection.
* The whole group uses the meeting to have a moan. It is OK to say *“I can see this is really important to you. Can we now look at ....”* and bring them back to the focus. If necessary say **“***It is not my role to convey your complaints to your teachers. This is an enquiry about ......”*Avoid taking the side of the group members against their teachers (or the side of the teachers against the group members!) and stay ‘in role’ as a neutral researcher.