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Methodology Brief: Focus Group Fundamentals

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Focus Group Fundamentals

Focus group methodology is one of several tools that educators can use to generate valid information important to the advancement of programs, communities, and organizations. This bulletin describes fundamental aspects of focus groups by distinguishing them from familiar research tools.

The Learning Problem

There are so many research tools. The sheer number makes learning challenging.

Imagine for a moment that focus group method was the **only** social research tool available. If so, surely we would be dissatisfied. The limitations of focus groups would be widely known. We would pray for someone to invent a different method. We would complain about the ineffectiveness of focus groups for comprehensively measuring the knowledge and perspectives of individuals. We would dream of a tool that could identify views on sensitive topics like sex, drugs and weight loss. Society would long for the day when a small sample of people could yield data that was representative of the view of an entire county, state, or nation. Sadly, focus groups do none of this well.

Of course, if focus group methodology were the only social research tool available, there would be benefits. Educators would understand the nuances of focus group methodology, having conquered the basics in college. All interested parties would be experienced in the art of convening and moderating focus group sessions. Analysis would be a snap. Clients, community leaders, members of boards, and legislators would eagerly apply focus group results into their decision making. Assistants could conduct focus groups in the absence of researchers—and we would be able to catch their mistakes.

Reality

The situation, of course, is different. Focus group methodology is one of many tools. Importantly, focus groups were developed **after** the rise of statistical survey methods. Most educators have survey methods ‘in their bones’ because they learned them first. This may make it difficult to get focus groups right. Survey methodology shares with focus group method a commitment to rigorous collection of high quality data and honest reporting. Like survey research, focus groups require special training. They may be subject to approval by university, school, tribal, or organizational Committee on Human Subjects. However, focus group methodology is different from quantitative survey methodology in its purposes, procedures, and results. Broadly speaking, there are more differences than similarities (see Table 1).

Table 1. Focus groups compared to survey methods

How Focus Groups Differ from Survey Methods

Insight not rules

Social not individual

Homogeneous not diverse

Flexible not standardized

Warm not hot

Words not numbers

Purposes

Insight not Rules

Focus groups arguably provide researchers with more surprises than other types of research. Individuals who participate in focus group sessions aren't restricted by the “A, B, C” choices provided

by the typical survey researcher. Participants generally are allowed to say anything they'd like in focus groups sessions. Focus groups therefore are considered to be naturalistic (Krueger and Casey, 2000). The researcher listens not only for the content of focus group discussions, but for emotions, ironies, contradictions, and tensions. This enables the researcher to learn or confirm not just the facts (as in survey method), but the meaning behind the facts. This is simplistic, but conveys a major advantage of focus group method: the production of insight.

Survey research, on the other hand, enables researchers to make predictions about the occurrence of a phenomenon on a large scale. Survey research can predict, from a relatively small sample of responses, how many people in the nation are likely to vote for a particular presidential candidate. In this way, survey research **generalizes**. Generalizations that are confirmed over and over lead to the development of theories regarding human behavior. Focus groups can provide trustworthy naturalistic data that also lead to important insights about human behavior, but they aren't set up to generalize in the same way as survey research (Fern, 2001).

Social not Individual

The focus group is a type of **group interview**. If there's no group, there is no focus group. The **social, semi-public** nature of the methodology shapes the data and the purposes that it serves. In a focus group session, conversation among participants results in data that are "talk." In this way, focus groups elicit information that paints a portrait of **combined local perspectives**. The researcher can see how it "all fits together" (for example, Duncan and Marotz-Baden, 1999).

However, focus group methodology is not a reliable technique for determining an individual's authentic point of view. Social norms get in the way. For example, during a focus group, a participant may affirm another participant by saying, "Right! Couldn't have said it better." However, the analyst must not assume that the individual has provided their final opinion on

the matter. It is plausible that the individual was being supportive rather than honest. The noisy social environment of focus groups also makes it an inappropriate setting in which to assess an individual's knowledge of content (Krueger and Casey, 2000). It is possible to gauge a groups' overall reaction to educational materials (see for example, Nordstrom et al., 2000), but not on an individual basis. To assess an individual's understanding of content matter, assess their knowledge in a quiet setting on an individual basis.

Procedures

Homogenous not Diverse

It makes good sense, when developing programs, to elicit as many points of view as possible. Focus groups do this well. However, one might assume that focus groups accomplish this by inviting a highly diverse group of people to participate in the same session. Regrettably, this doesn't work very well. Instead, focus group researchers select and invite 20-25 people with similar characteristics to a single session. The goal is to fill the room with a minimum of **10-12 participants** that are similar (Krueger and Casey, 2000). Even when **incentives** are provided, such as refreshments, child care, or stipends, no-shows are common, so don't get caught short.

Composing a group with highly different characteristics will decrease the quality of the data. Individuals will tend to censor their ideas in the presence of people who differ greatly from them in power, status, job, income, education, or personal characteristics. To get a cross section of views from a diverse population using focus group method, it is necessary to conduct **multiple sessions**. To understand the perspectives of a different group of people, compose multiple focus groups on the same topic.

For the next group, also invite people who are alike; however, they will be 'similar' according to a different criterion. This procedure explains why professional researchers typically report results from a series of sessions rather than from a single focus group session. Although it is common practice to conduct a single focus group session, the data may not be reliable.

For example, in an evaluation report of a retreat for environmental educators, the moderator conducted separate focus groups for first time attendees and for participants who had attended for many years (Eells, 2002). The key to deciding which features are important to keep the same or vary depends on the type of **community** and the **topic** of the focus group.

Flexible not Standardized

Focus group method strives to produce **good conversation** on a given topic. Good conversation ebbs and flows. Individuals laugh, tell personal stories, revisit an earlier question, disagree, contradict themselves, and interrupt. However, the researcher must balance the needs of participants to 'have their say' against the need to stay **focused**.

A focus group moderator wants both natural features of conversation as well as focused discussion in the course of a two-hour session. The moderator accomplishes this balancing act by using an **interview guide** (Morgan and Krueger, 1998). A well-designed guide assists group members to **relax, open up, think deeply, and consider alternatives**.

A good design also allows for synergy to occur, which produces greater insight due to the fact that participants work together during the session. Questions in an interview guide flow from **general to specific**. They **invite openness** and **avoid bias**. However, it is a mistake to apply the guide as if it were a multiple choice test or phone interview. The prize does not go to the swift or the efficient. Avoid sounding mechanical and list-like. The result of a focus group should not be a series of short burst responses.

A final difference from normal conversation is the fact that focus group sessions are typically audio taped and transcribed.

Warm not Hot

Focus groups produce conversations that border on intimacy. One might assume that focus groups therefore can be used to investigate private topics or subjects that people feel deeply about. The rule of thumb is that the topic can be **warm but not**

hot. Consider that conversation in many cultures **avoids conflict**. Consider also that individuals are adept at changing the subject away from overtly private matters, like sex and salaries. In general, people strive to be polite. Therefore, focus groups do not produce reliable data on topics that produce extremely strong feelings (Krueger and Casey, 2000). Whereas a focus group about weight loss programming might succeed if participants are carefully chosen and purposefully invited, it would likely not work to convene focus groups with victims of domestic violence and expect them to discuss their individual experiences.

Reporting

Words not Numbers

In the analysis stage, survey research requires transformation of numbers with statistics (at minimum, it requires the calculation of percentages). The end result is a report featuring graphs and tables. Focus groups, on the other hand, rely upon **words** spoken by participants. The focus on language earns focus group methodology the label, qualitative (Creswell, 1998). A report based on focus groups will feature **patterns** formed by words, called **themes or perspectives**. Researchers must use specific methods to analyze patterns in spoken language (Creswell, 1998). Numerical analysis is not a preferred technique.

In fact, it is inappropriate to report the results of focus groups by percentage (e.g., *Among the five focus groups, an average of 56 percent of participants mentioned their frustration with the procedures for applying for public assistance*). Instead, a focus group result might read like this:

Another theme noted in focus groups on housing was the value of the (community) housing market to the participant's current home. Participants frequently mentioned the cost they had paid for their last home...and used this home's cost and amenities as a yardstick against which they measured... housing (in the community under discussion). (Larson and Hegland, 2003).

The focus group data in the previous example enable the researcher to determine residents' logic in addition to their judgments.

A report of results from focus groups should not present major findings via frequencies or statistics because 'counting' leads readers to believe that percentages or frequencies are true for a much wider population (which they are not). Quantitative survey researchers go to great lengths to design a study so that numerical data generalize to a wider population with mathematical precision. Focus groups method isn't meant to create generalizations of this type and its procedures offer none of the protections that would permit them to do so (Fern, 2001).

Focus Groups And Other Qualitative Methods

Focus group shares features with other **qualitative** approaches to research. However, focus group methodology is not interchangeable with the others. Knowing the commonalties, however, allows educators to choose wisely. If a client wants the educator to provide leadership for a focus group, but conditions are wrong, they may be able to suggest a more suitable qualitative method.

Local Perspectives, Rich Detail

All qualitative research illuminates **local perspectives in rich detail** (Creswell, 1998). Results are highly believable because qualitative research reports **actual statements** from real people. Qualitative approaches differ from focus groups in the intensity and individuality of the perspectives. Personal interviews provide **in depth** information about a **single** individual that results in a comprehensive if isolated view. **Ethnography** tracks **both groups and individuals** in **natural settings** typically over a **long period of time** (Schensul and LeCompte, 1999). Ethnography is the qualitative approach made famous by anthropologists. For example, contemporary ethnography in the United States has tracked the

activities of visitors to national parks and monitors illegal drug trade along regional corridors.

Talk and Silence

Conversation is the heart of the focus group. However, qualitative techniques also highlight what is not said — **silence** — as clues to perspectives and world views (Schensul and LeCompte, 1999). For example, if a focus group is conducted on campus climate, students may only talk about the effect of climate on themselves. Faculty may talk about its effect on students, staff, and on themselves. But neither may mention the effect of campus climate on 'invisible' workers like janitorial and food service workers or on community members who live nearby. The silence would say something about the values and networks of participants in the focus group sessions, and would predict the success or failure of different types of programs to improve campus climate. Humor also is important to monitor. Race and ethnicity sometimes appear in ethnographic accounts only as jokes rather than the topic of thoughtful discussion, indicating discomfort and/or lack of awareness.

Shared Control

All qualitative approaches share control of the research experience with participants. Qualitative approaches take advantage of **spontaneous, unexpected elements**. For example, a participant may raise a topic or respond in a way that the moderator or interviewer did not anticipate. Focus group moderators **encourage** such occurrences. They watch how others respond. If the line of discussion contributes to an understanding of the topic, the moderator may encourage even more discussion. They may build the new 'point' into the interview guide for future sessions (Krueger and Casey, 2000).

Qualitative approaches, such as participatory action research, share control even more vigorously. In participatory research, the entire topic can change based on the interests of participants (Greenwood and Levin, 1998). This

would not occur with focus group technique. Personal interviews also share some control. The amount, sequence, and phrasing of talk, as well as specific topics, are managed as much by the interviewee as by the researcher (Creswell, 1998). However, the interviewer reestablishes control in analysis and reporting by highlighted selected aspects. Ethnographers typically permit the local environment to control almost everything. The lack of control—chaos even—tells the ethnographer a lot. However, the ethnographer exerts control by observing some aspects of the environment more closely than others (Schensul and LeCompte, 1999).

Summary

Focus groups produce high quality data if they are employed for the right purposes, using the right procedures. Leaders who favor survey research may find it challenging to learn and apply principles of focus group method. Focus group method is challenging not because it is more difficult than survey research but because survey research was probably learned first. That said, focus group research can produce highly useful information about programs and services that surveys miss, so it may be worthwhile to rise to the challenge.

Table 2. Elements of focus groups.

Element	Focus Groups
Format	Group session
Size	8-12 per session; invite twice as many
Length	1.5 to 2 hours
Number of sessions	Varies; should be more than 1
Participants	1. Selected; by invitation only 2. Similar characteristics
Forms of data	1. Conversation, including tone of voice 2. Silences (words and issues) 3. Body language
Data collection	1. Audiotape 2. Transcribe
Moderator	1. Flexible yet focused 2. Uses interview guide; modify based on early sessions
Formats for reporting	1. Selected quotations 2. Analysis of repeated themes
Committee on Human Subjects	Submit as for other social research

Recommended Readings

Morgan, D. L. (editor) 1993. *Successful Focus Groups: Advancing the State of the Art*. Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage.

Larson, K., N. Grudens-Schuck, and B. Lundy Allen, 2004. *Can You Call It a Focus Group?* Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Extension. <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/PM1969A.pdf>

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