

Collecting Data: Using Focus Groups

Dr Anthea Rose

Research Fellow, Lincoln Higher Education Research Institute (LHERI)

Introduction

This short research notice takes a closer look at focus groups as a method of collecting data for research and evaluation. It explains what focus groups are, presents the advantages and disadvantages of using them over other forms of data collection methods and considers planning requirements, including ethics. Practical tips on how to run a focus group and how to analyse the resulting data are also included. Whilst this research notice is aimed at those carrying out research with students and others in educational settings, the underlying principles can be applied across all disciplines and contexts in which using focus groups would be deemed appropriate.

What is a focus group?

'A focus group is the interaction between participants rather than between participants and researcher' (Bagnoli and Clark, 2010:104).

Focus groups are frequently used within educational and other settings as a way of collecting people's opinions on particular topics. They allow researchers to consider different views and experiences on a topic as well as people's shared understandings. In addition, they enable researchers to consider data produced from the *interaction* between participants as indicated¹.

Focus groups normally involve a small number of participants, typically 4-8, but there can be as many as 10 or more involved if required. Participants usually take part in a discussion around a particular topic which is guided by a facilitator (i.e. the researcher or evaluator). The facilitator typically prepares a set of initial questions or prompts and takes a mainly passive role in the process. Facilitators may interject to draw out further detail or encourage contributions, particularly if some members of the group are quiet or others are dominating the discussion. The facilitator is also there to keep the discussion on topic. Focus groups can be videoed or digitally

¹ This overview section is adapted from the Sussex Learning Network information on conducting focus groups: <https://www.sussexlearningnetwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Focus-Groups-Guide.pdf>.

recorded and/or recorded in written notes taken in order to capture both what is said and the interaction between participants (body language can be an important aspect of data collection too). Focus groups are often used without the formality and resource implications involved in conducting individual interviews and gather *qualitative* data.

Advantages and disadvantages of using focus groups

The advantages and disadvantages of focus groups are summarised as follows:

| Advantages of focus groups | Disadvantages of focus groups |
|---|---|
| They collect in-depth information from a number of people at the same time. | The significant role of group dynamics can shape what participants may, or may not, reveal. |
| They save time as they provide multiple views in one session. | Some participants may be reluctant to speak in a group setting. |
| They provide flexibility to explore a topic. | They are less in-depth than individual interviews. |
| They help develop ideas. | They can be time consuming to organise and conduct. |
| They empower participants by giving them a voice. | They can be time consuming and difficult to transcribe. |
| They have the potential to redress issues of power. | They can be time consuming and difficult to analyse. |

Things to consider when planning a focus group

- *Location and length* - Think carefully about the basics such as location and the length of the focus group. Aim for a space that feels neutral and where people have enough personal space. Most focus groups last between 60-90 minutes to enable discussion to generate but not stagnate. With younger participants they are often much shorter.
- *Putting the participants at ease* - Begin the session with an icebreaker to relax participants and get them talking. For young people make this as interactive as possible.
- *Usefulness of questions* - Test the focus group questions with someone else beforehand. Ensure there are not too many questions and that questions are open-ended enough to provoke a vibrant discussion rather than aim at

gathering more descriptive information. Prepare some prompts to aid discussion if needed.

- *The order of questions* - Organise questions in a logical order and start with something relatively straightforward to enable participants to feel comfortable in the discussion before building up to more contentious or challenging topics. You can have essential questions and some optional ones that you will use if you have time but equally that you can leave if the discussion takes longer than anticipated.
- *Participant information* - Inform participants about the nature of the group in advance, including sending copies of any ethical documents. Indicate the topics rather than the questions to be covered to avoid preparation.
- *Ethics* - Check whether or not you require formal ethical approval (see section below). Even if you do not have to seek formal consent, it is good practice to ensure that participants know the purpose of the focus group, how their information will be used and that they have the right to withdraw at any time.

Ethics

Working within the university you will need to follow the university's ethical guidelines at all times (e.g. to ensure anonymity, confidentiality, informed consent and safe working. You may also need to check your own professional/discipline research association guidelines as specific requirements may vary. In the UK, educational researchers tend to subscribe to the British Educational Research Association guidelines (BERA, 2018) as well as those of their home institution.

How to run a focus group

Focus groups can take any number of different forms. In addition to the number of participants and duration mentioned earlier, careful consideration should also be directed towards the following:

- *Who* you want in the group and how will they be selected (sampling)?
- Choose a quiet location or room. Position participants in a semi-circle or around a desk so that everyone is included.
- Where will the facilitator and note taker sit and how will they interact with the group?

- Introduce the facilitator and ask participants to introduce themselves (they may not know each other).
- Ensure everyone knows why they are attending and participating.
- If appropriate, take in discussion aids (e.g. photos, audio recordings, videos, post-it notes, pens, paper, flipcharts, and whiteboards).
- Use plain, clear language and avoid jargon when talking with the participants.
- Establish some ground rules including the participants if appropriate (e.g. no mobile phones, respecting each other's opinions, only one person talks at a time)
- Ask everyone's permission to record the session before beginning.
- Begin with an 'ice breaker' then ask simple, open questions before moving on to more complex matters.
- Follow up answers or explore responses further simple, open questions for clarification/extension where appropriate.
- At the end of the session always ask if anyone has anything else to add.
- Thank participants for their time.

Analysing your focus group data

There are several ways to analyse qualitative focus group data including thematically, by content, by narrative or discourse means or using a grounded theory approach. Thematic or content approaches are usually the easiest to do and entirely satisfactory for most purposes. But remember:

- Analysis is no easy task. Begin by transcribing your focus group discussion as fully as possible.
- The transcription may then need to be coded. This just means organising the information you have into a workable format to help you make sense of it. This can be done either by hand or by using qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo. NVivo can work well if you have a lot of complex or involved data to analyse.
- Look for key words, phrases and quotes in the data, or patterns of response that emerge.
- Do not discount one-off views and experiences.
- It is usually considered good practice to get other researchers to read your transcripts to see if they identify the same or similar themes. This will also help you check if you have missed anything.
- When you are doing several focus groups you can use the data to compare the views and experiences of one group with another.

- Always remember to be true to the data. Do not manipulate the data to fit what you think it should be telling you.

In conclusion

Focus groups provide a flexible, economical and valuable means of collecting qualitative data for research purposes and their use in Higher Education is relatively commonplace. As with all methods, however, their use comes with limitations. Advance planning and careful consideration of purpose and context are essential.

Further reading

Acocella, I. (2012) The focus group in social research: Advantages and disadvantages. *Qual Quant*, 46, 1125–1136.

Adler, K., Salantera, S and Zumstein-Shaha, M. (2019) Focus group interviews in child, youth and parent research: An integrative literature review. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18, 1–15.

Bagnoli A. and Clark, A. (2010) Focus groups with young people: A participatory approach to research planning. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 13(1), 101-119.

BERA (2018) *Ethical guidelines for educational research*. [Available at: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018>]

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2017) *Research methods in education*. London: Routledge,