

Building An Assessment Toolbox: Designing Rigorous and Relevant Focus Groups

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ODU Team

- **Conducted more than 75 focus groups on:**
 - Transfer students
 - Student success
 - Quality of work life in student affairs
 - Assisting the new President to create a vision for the University
 - Assisting the President to do a SWOT analysis for the Strategic Plan
 - Evaluating a new, multidisciplinary, general education course
 - ODU sense of community
- **Developed a focus group methodology that includes:**
 - Combining relevance of qualitative research with rigor of quantitative research
 - Use of co-moderators
 - Using co-moderators to conduct the data analyses
 - Conducting Town Hall meetings to validate results with participants

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Designing Focus Groups: Learning Outcomes

Participants will be able to

- **design a focus group project with consideration of basic qualitative data analysis principles**
- **develop goals and write research questions**
- **determine when focus groups are appropriate or inappropriate**
- **identify and recruit appropriate focus group participants**
- **demonstrate a knowledge of the logistics for conducting good focus groups**

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Designing Focus Groups: Learning Outcomes

Participants will be able to

- **demonstrate an understanding of the typical structure of a focus group session**
- **write appropriate focus group questions**
- **design an effective moderators guide**
- **describe the moderators role, selection criteria, and necessary training**
- **analyze focus group data and draft an accurate report**

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Introduction to Focus Groups as a Qualitative Research Methodology

Qualitative research is:

- Not as rigorous as quantitative research**
- More relevant than quantitative research**
- Both rigorous and relevant**
- Useful only to supplement quantitative research**

Focus groups are:

- Informal discussion groups**
- Leaderless discussion groups**
- Structured discussion groups**
- Qualitative research tool**

Definitions

“a group discussion that resembles a lively conversation among friends or neighbors.”

Morgan, 1988, p. 22

“The conversations in focus groups give you a sense of what makes people tick and a sense of what’s going on with people’s minds and lives that you simply can’t get with survey data.”

Atwater, 1998. p.1

Definitions

Our preferred definition:

Confidential group discussion with a trained and skilled moderator using open ended questions that promote interaction and explore participants perspectives and experiences in a structured but relaxed atmosphere designed to generate qualitative data.

Characteristics

“Focus group interviews typically have six characteristics or features. These characteristics relate to the ingredients of a focus group:

- **People**
- **Assembled in a series of groups**
- **Possess certain characteristics, and**
- **Provide data**
- **Of a qualitative nature**
- **In a focused discussion.” (Krueger, 1994, p. 16).**

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Qualitative Vs. Quantitative Research

Quantitative studies yield generalizable data from a random sample of sufficient size

Qualitative studies yield in-depth description from a small homogeneous sample

Our approach to focus groups is an attempt to balance the depth of qualitative studies with some capability to generalize

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is “at best an **umbrella term** covering an array of interpretative techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise ***come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency***, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world” (Whit, 1991, p. 407)

Qualitative Research

Both science and art (Patton, 1990 in Whitt, 1991):

Both rigorous and relevant
(Hadley & Mitchell, 1995)

Qualitative Research

Characteristics (Whit, 1991; Schuh & Upcraft, 2001):

- ✓ Focus on understanding how members of a population make meaning of their experiences rather than trying to generalize
- ✓ People are the research tools who collect, analyze, and interpret the data
- ✓ Goal is to develop a theory based on the analyses rather than to test a theory
- ✓ Researchers discuss their biases rather than attempting to conduct an unbiased study

Qualitative Research

Data collection methods

(Whit, 1991):

- ✓ Interviews, including focus groups
- ✓ Observation
- ✓ Document analysis
- ✓ Multiple methods - triangulation

Qualitative Research

Sampling methods

(Schuh & Upcraft, 2001):

- ✓ Purposive vs. random
- ✓ Small vs. large
- ✓ Homogeneous
- ✓ Stratified purposeful

Qualitative Research

Data analysis

(Schuh & Upcraft, 2001):

- ✓ Analyzing words vs. numbers
- ✓ Inductive – themes and theories emerge from the data
- ✓ Constant comparative – comparisons among subgroups (students, faculty, staff) and across the group (institution)

Qualitative Research

Writing the report

(Whit, 1991, p. 412):

- ✓ An interpretative task
- ✓ “Thick description”
- ✓ Verbatim quotations

Qualitative Research

Ethical Issues (Whit, 1991):

- ✓ Protect participants confidentiality in all reports
- ✓ Provide participants sufficient information about the study so they can make an informed decision about whether or not to participate
- ✓ Conduct the study in a professional and responsible manner to minimize impact on participants
- ✓ Offer participants copies of the reports

Overview of Focus Groups

Effective Focus Groups

- Cover maximum *range* of topics; some cued by the researchers and others brought up by the participants
- Provide *specific* data about participants' perspectives and experiences as a basis of their attitudes and opinions
- Explore participants' experiences in *depth*
- Explore the *personal context* within which the participants offer their attitudes and opinions

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Uses of Focus Groups

- **To gather data about how participants make meaning about a topic of interest (sole source)**
- **To gather data needed to construct a survey (exploratory)**
- **To gather data that can be used to help explain the results of a survey (follow-up)**

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Advantages of Focus Groups

**“Because much of personal and professional lives involve working with, depending upon, sharing with, and learning from others, why shouldn’t research methods also involve groups and obtaining valuable information from individuals within group settings?”
(Carnaghi, 1992, p. 107)**

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Advantages of Focus Groups

(Hess, 1978, p. 194)

Synergism	Serendipity
Snowballing	Specialization
Stimulation	Scientific Scrutiny
Security	Structure
Spontaneity	Speed

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Advantages

- **Synergism:** The combined effect of the group will produce a wider range of information, insight, and ideas than will the accumulation of the responses of a number of individuals when these replies are secured privately.
- **Snowballing:** A bandwagon effect often operates in a group interview situation in that a comment by one individual often triggers a chain of responses from the other participants
- **Stimulation:** Usually after a brief introductory period the respondents get "turned on" in that they want to express their ideas and expose their feelings as the general level of excitement over the topic increases in the group
- **Security:** The participants can usually find comfort in the group in that their feelings are not greatly different from other participants and they are more willing to express their ideas and feelings.
- **Spontaneity:** Since individuals are not required to answer any given question in a group interview, their responses can be more spontaneous and less conventional, and should provide a more accurate picture of their position on some issues.

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Advantages

- **Serendipity:** It is more often the case in a group rather than individual interview that some idea will "drop out of the blue."
- **Specialization:** The group interview allows the use of a more highly trained, but more expensive, interviewer since a number of individuals are being "interviewed" simultaneously.
- **Scientific Scrutiny:** The group interview allows closer scrutiny of the data collection process in that several observers can witness the session and it can be recorded for later playback and analysis.
- **Structure:** The group interview affords more flexibility than the individual interview with regard to the topics covered and the depth with which they are treated.
- **Speed:** Since a number of individuals are being interviewed at the same time, the group interview speeds up the data collection and analysis process.

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Tasks for Planning Focus Groups

1. **Define (or learn) the goals of the project and write research questions**
2. **Select participants and subsets of participants**
3. **Design the Moderators Guide**
4. **Select and Train the Moderators**
5. **Conduct the Focus Groups**
6. **Analyze the Data and Report Results**

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