Methods Guides
How to run a focus group

Introduction

This guidance is for any staff member interested in holding a focus group for the purposes of evaluating Teaching and Learning. It aims to outline and help you to consider the steps you can take before, during and after to ensure you run a successful focus group. The success of a focus group relies on planning, and there are several simple steps you can take to ensure the information you collect in your focus group is reliable and useful.

What is a focus group?

A focus group is a recorded interview with a small group (4-8 people) which is moderated. The overarching aim of all focus groups is to obtain a deeper understanding of an issue. Focus groups differ from one-to-one interviews because they use the interaction between participants to explore a topic in depth. A focus group tends to concentrate on a fairly defined topic with questions that encourage dialogue and interaction between participants. Focus groups do not seek to generate data that can be generalised to a population and so a diverse, rather than representative, sample is sought. Diversity in focus groups is achieved via careful selection of participants who can offer a range of perspectives and experiences.

Why run a focus group?

Focus groups are excellent for:

- **discovering** ideas you haven't considered
- **accessing** individual narratives and gathering rich, participant-driven data
- **exploring** views of those who might not be willing to give feedback alone
- **encouraging** contribution from those who don't think they have much to share, but will give important insights when in a group
- **informing** further evaluation

When not to run a focus group

Focus groups are not good if you are seeking to access individual narratives (one-to-one interviews would be better) of if you require data that can be generalised to a wider group (a survey would be better), or if the topic you are seeking to explore is likely to be sensitive.

Running a focus group (before, during and after)

Collecting data using focus groups can be time consuming. Typically, preparation time, 1-2 hours per focus group, 1 hour of transcribing per hour of recording, analysis and reporting. If you are short of time, another method may be a more suitable choice.

This section outlines some of the key considerations for each stage of the process.

Preparation

First consider what are you trying to achieve from a focus group:

- What question do you want to explore?
- What do you already know?
- What else do you need to know?
- Are focus groups the best way of finding out?

Once you have decided on the above, you should:

- Consider if there is any likelihood that the data gathered from the focus groups might be used in any future publication or public presentation. If so, it is likely you will need to seek ethical approval
- Create your **topic guide** which is a document that helps you to explore a topic without leading the discussion. A topic guide includes a list of topics, open-ended questions and prompts you would like to use. To help participants feel comfortable in sharing their views, it is usually structured to begin with general experiences and progress to more specific questions (opening questions -> introductory questions -> transition questions -> key questions -> ending questions). Your topic guide should be used flexibly within a focus group and digression from this is encouraged. You will often find participants will raise issues without you needing to prompt
- Decide who will moderate- Consider the Principles of Partnership and consider collaborating with a student partner by inviting them to moderate. This can help to elicit more natural/honest answers
- Decide how many groups are required. Good practice is to always run more than one focus group. If your focus groups are mixed, then two focus groups will likely suffice, although more will help you gather a diversity of views. If you plan to run focus groups with participants who share a particular characteristic then two focus groups per characteristic are needed, for example two focus groups with Home students and two focus groups with Overseas students if students' origin was of interest to you
- Decide how you will identify and recruit participants. Think how your recruitment choice may influence the diversity of views and contributions participants feel comfortable to make
- When inviting participants, you should inform them of Data Protection issues and that the focus group will be recorded. You could use the sample wording - Appendix 1. Any queries regarding Data Protection should be referred to imps@reading.ac.uk for advice
- Consider how best to structure the groups - the types of participants at each group will influence the contributions made. Sometimes mixing participants with different characteristics works well, and encourages discussion but on other occasions it might be better to structure the groups so that a group comprises participants who share a characteristic. This is especially important if you think that participants with particular characteristics might be less likely to contribute in a mixed group
- Decide on the location and setting and book this – maximise attendance by identifying occasions when students will already be on campus or online. Whether online or face-to-face, think of what will be familiar and comfortable with students. If face-to-face, try to ensure there is an opportunity to mingle and provide refreshments

- Identify if you can reward participants through RED Award hours/payment. If making payment, this must be arranged through Campus Jobs
- If planning to use data in a future publication or presentation, prepare a consent form to be signed by participants at the start of the focus group. You could use the sample consent form- Appendix 2

Running the Focus Group

Always audio-record a focus group and take notes throughout. You may want to use two audio recording devices in case one fails. Where possible, have a co-moderator who makes notes, enabling you to focus on moderating the group. Remember that your goal is to encourage interaction between participants, not between yourself and participants.

Before the focus group begins, ensure participants are aware and have given verbal consent (or signed consent forms if applicable) to the session being recorded, set out ground rules and remind participants that anything shared is confidential and shouldn't be discussed beyond the room.

It is a good idea to try and build rapport with participants. You could achieve this by having a short icebreaker or discussing something humorous or topical.

Next, ensure there is a shared understanding of the key terms/concepts to be discussed. Often moderators know what they mean by a term, but participants have a different understanding. This can be done by asking "When I say x, what does that mean to you?" This is also a good opening question, as it allows all participants to make a contribution and there are no right or wrong answers.

When moderating, you should steer the discussion but avoid disclosing your own views and assumptions. You can use your topic guide to help with this and ensure you ask probing questions which don't lead.

- Visuals can be extremely effective in stimulating discussion. For example, if you want feedback on a resource, consider taking an example to show rather than relying on memory/descriptions
- Use sensitive, clear and neutral language
- Avoid interrupting participants
- Silence is ok and can even be used to draw out responses

At the end of the discussion on each question/topic, it can be helpful to repeat back a summary of views to check your understanding of what participants have said.

When you come towards a close, always thank participants for their time. You may find that participants will say interesting things after you have turned off the audio recording- note these down!

Afterwards

It is good practice to transcribe the interviews. This is to ensure you pay close attention to everything that participants said, rather than just the things you were expecting to hear. If transcribing your data, you should anonymise as you go to ensure participants are not identifiably from transcriptions. If your Focus Group study has not required Research Ethics Committee approval, then you should delete the recordings once transcription is completed. If your Focus Groups study required approval, Research Ethics Committees will have specific requirements about data storage and destruction.

To analyse your data, a good starting point is to read the transcripts and begin with a summary describing the key issues discussed. Then re-read the transcripts more closely, making notes about the themes that arise. Consider what the data tells you and how this links to other student feedback/data you have.

You should be reflexive and critically aware of how your own opinions may have influenced your interpretation of participants' comments and try and be as objective as possible.

If you would like to make a change as a result of your focus groups, work in partnership with your students to identify how this could best be achieved. Utilise the E&I Framework for any changes planned.

Whether making changes or not, remember that it is essential to close the feedback loop to the participants. The Closing the Feedback Loop Guidance can help you consider ways to do this effectively.

Practicalities checklist

Sought ethical approval (if applicable)	
Decided topic and prepared Topic Guide	
Agreed Moderator and found Co-moderator (If applicable)	
Agreed Incentives	
Decided Sample and Invited Participants	
Arranged incentives (if applicable)	
Booked suitable room	
Ordered catering	
Have consent form ready for participants (if applicable)	
Have audio recording device + back up device	
Transcribed audio (if applicable)	
Summarised themes and analysed feedback	
Action plan (if applicable)	
Closed feedback loop with participants	

Next Steps

Want to learn more? – Book onto "Designing and Facilitating Focus Groups for Programme Evaluation" via UoR Learn.

Some further reading:

Barbour, R. (2008). Doing Focus Groups. Sage. - A short, accessible guide which describes all aspects of conducting a focus group.

Harvey, J. (1998). Evaluation Cookbook. Edinburgh: LTDI. Available at: http://www.icbl.hw.ac.uk/ltdi/cookbook/cookbook.pdf. - Another accessible guide which covers focus groups as well as other evaluation methods.

Rosanna L. Breen (2006). A Practical Guide to Focus-Group Research, Journal of Geography in Higher Education, 30:3, 463-475, DOI: 10.1080/03098260600927575 - Another short, accessible guide which describes all aspects of conducting a focus group.

Appendices

Appendix 1- Sample wording for email

A possible structure for an email you could send to participants in advance of a focus group:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in a focus group about _____. By participating in this focus group, you will provide us with valuable insights into your experience which will then inform our approach to _____

Your responses are voluntary and confidential and will be held securely and in line with the University's Information Compliance Policies. No personally identifiable information will be reported and responses to questions, discussion and comments will be summarised. Should you wish to stop participating, this can be done at any time without any repercussion, however, due to the anonymised nature of any summary report, it may not be possible to identify and remove inputs after the point at which they are anonymised.

To assist with my note-taking, for reference purposes I would like to audio-record the focus group discussion. I do not intend to transcribe the entire recording but simply to use it to clarify if I have any queries when writing up my notes. The recording will be deleted as soon as the notes have been written. If you do not wish to be recorded please let me know and I will just take notes."

University of Reading

Consent Form

Title of Research: Click here to enter text.

Principal investigator: Name: Email:

1.   I have had explained to me the purposes of the project and what will be required of me, and any questions I have had have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to the arrangements described in the Information Sheet in-so far as they relate to my participation.

2.   I understand that participation is voluntary. I can change your mind at any time without any repercussions. I can stop completing the activities at any time; however, due to the anonymised nature of the questionnaire and the workshops, it will not be possible to identify and remove my inputs once they have been given.

3.   I understand that the data collected from me in this study will be preserved and made available in anonymised form, so that it can be consulted and re-used by others. Any data collected will be held in strict confidence, and no real names will be used in this study or in any subsequent publications. The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking participants will be included in any sort of report that might be published.

4.   Research records will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet and on a password-protected computer and only the research team will have access to the records. Any recordings will be deleted at the completion of any transcription, and with any further data to be destroyed after a period of 5 years.

5.   The results of the study may be written up as a report for the University and may also be used presented at national and international conferences, and in written articles.

6.   This project has been reviewed by the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct.

Name: …………………………………………………………………………………

Signed: …………………………………………..…………………………………

Date: ……………………………………………..…………………………………

Aim of Focus Group Study:

To determine whether participants perceived they had sufficient support for their. In particular, to explore whether there are differences between Home and Overseas students in the support received.

Design:

Two focus groups with Overseas students plus two focus groups with Home students.

Topic Guide

Explain the purpose of the Focus Group, establish consent and ground rules, explain what is meant by Home and Overseas student for the purpose of the focus group.

Opening Questions (enable all participants to contribute something right from the start):

1. What made you want to participate in this Focus Group?
2. Have you ever participated in a Focus Group before?

Introductory Questions (introduce the topic of interest)

3. What comes to mind when I say "support for learning"? What sort of things does that make you think about?

Transition Questions (lead from introductory question towards key question by seeking greater specificity depth)

4. What makes you think that? Can you give me an example?

Key Questions (what your Focus Group aims to explore)

5. What sort of support did you receive for your learning? [use the answers given to Question 3 to probe].
6. What support helped you most?
7. Was support offered that you didn't find helpful?
8. Are there things that you think would have been supportive, but that you weren't offered?
9. Do you feel you received enough support for your learning on this programme?
10. Do you think there are differences between Home and Overseas students in terms of the sort of support for learning they need, or find useful? Can you give examples?

Ending Questions (enable participants to summarise their views, and check your understanding)

11. Now you've heard other participants' views, have your views changed at all?