

Focus Groups Workshop

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9:00-9:15	Introductions
9:15-10:00	The What, Why, Where and When of Focus Groups
10:00-10:30	Selecting Participants, Moderator Skills
10:30-10:40	Break
10:40-11:30	Practicing Moderator Skills
11:30-12:00	Developing Questions
12:00-1:00	Lunch (on your own)
1:00-1:45	Developing Questions Exercise (small groups)
1:45-2:15	Sharing and Critiquing Questions
2:15-2:50	Focus Groups Data Analysis
2:50-3:00	Break
3:00-3:30	How Focus Groups Are Used in Extension Evaluation (Faye Malek, Extension Educator, Manitowoc County, (920)683-4171, faye.malek@ces.uwex.edu)
3:30-3:45	Reporting Findings
3:45-4:00	Summary, Reflections and Evaluation

Moderator Skills

Selects the right moderator

- Exercise mild unobtrusive control
- Adequate knowledge of topic
- Appears like the participants

Uses an assistant moderator

- Handles logistics
- Takes careful notes
- Monitors recording equipment

Is mentally prepared

- Alert and free from distractions
- Has the discipline of listening
- Memorizes questioning route

Uses purposeful small talk

- Create warm and friendly environment
- Observe the participants for seating arrangements

Records the discussion

- Tape recorders
- Written notes

Has a smooth & snappy introduction

- Standard introduction
 1. Welcome
 2. Overview and topic
 3. Ground rules
 4. First question

Uses pauses and probes

- 5-second pause
- "Would you explain further?"
- "Would you give an example?"
- "I don't understand."

Controls reactions to participants

- Verbal and nonverbal
- Head nodding
- Short verbal responses
- (avoid "that's good," "excellent")

Uses subtle group control

- Experts
- Dominant talkers
- Shy participants
- Ramblers

Selects appropriate location

- Neutral
- Free from distractions
- Participants facing each other

Uses appropriate conclusion

- Three Step Conclusion
 1. Summarize with confirmation
 2. Review purpose and ask anything has been missed
 3. Thanks and dismissal

Expectations of the Assistant Moderator

Take responsibility for equipment

Ensure that needed equipment is available and working. This includes recorders, microphone, tapes, hand-outs, etc.

Take responsibility for refreshments

Arrange for food (either complete meals or snacks) and beverages to be available on time.

Arrange the room

Arrange chairs and table. Be attentive to background noises that would affect the audio recording as well as room temperature and lighting.

Welcome participants as they arrive

You are the host. Make participants feel welcome and comfortable.

Sit in designated location

Sit outside the circle, opposite the moderator and closest to the door. Greet those arriving late and find them a place to sit.

Take notes throughout the discussion

Operate recording equipment

Be familiar with the tape recorder. Turn over or insert another tape as quietly as possible. Label the cassette tapes.

Do not participate in the discussion

Talk only if invited by the moderator. Control your non-verbal actions no matter how strongly you feel about an issue.

Ask questions when invited

At the end of the discussion the moderator will invite you to ask questions of amplification or clarification.

Give an oral summary

Provide a brief oral summary (about 3 minutes). Invite participants to offer additions or corrections to the summary.

Thank participants and hand out the honorariums (if applicable)

Debrief with moderator

Discuss overall impressions, notable quotes, key ideas or insights presented, and how this group compared to other groups.

Give feedback on analysis and reports

Read reports and provide feedback.

Beginning the Focus Group Discussion

The first few moments in focus group discussion are critical. In a brief time the moderator must create a thoughtful, permissive atmosphere, provide the ground rules and set the tone of the discussion. Much of the success of group interviewing can be attributed to the development of this open environment.

The recommended pattern for introducing the group discussion includes: (1) The welcome, (2) The overview and topic, (3) The ground rules and (4) The first question. Here is an example of a typical introduction:

Good evening and welcome to our session tonight. Thank you for taking the time to join our discussion of county educational services. My name is Dick Krueger and I represent University of Wisconsin-Extension. Assisting me is Tom Olson, also from the University of Wisconsin-Extension. We are attempting to gain information about educational opportunities in the community. We have invited people who live in several different parts of the county to share their ideas.

You were selected because you have certain things in common that are of particular interest to us. You are all employed outside of the home and you live in the suburban areas of the county. We are particularly interested in your views because you are representative of others in the county.

Tonight we will be discussing informal education in the community. This includes all the ways you gain new information about areas of interest to you. There are no right or wrong answers but rather differing points of view. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said.

Before we begin, let me remind you of some ground rules. Please speak up-only one person should talk at a time. We're tape-recording the session because we don't want to miss any of your comments. If several are talking at the same time, the tape will get garbled and we'll miss your comments. We will be on a first name basis tonight, and in our later reports there will not be any names attached to comments. You may be assured of complete confidentiality. Keep in mind that we're just as interested in negative comments as positive comments, and at times the negative comments are the most helpful.

Our session will last about an hour and a half, and we will not be taking a formal break. Well, let's begin. We've placed name cards on the table in front of you to help us remember each other's names. Let's find out some more about each other by going around the room one at a time. Tell us your name and where you live.

Asking Questions that Yield Powerful Information

1. Use open-ended questions

What did you think of the program?
How did you feel about the conference?
Where do you get new information?
What do you like best about the proposed program?

Be cautious of phrases such as "how satisfied" or "to what extent"

2. Avoid dichotomous questions

These are questions that can be answered with a yes or no.

3. "Why?" is rarely asked

Can make people defensive and that they need to provide an answer
When you ask why, people usually respond with attributes or influences. So
It's better to ask what prompted, or what features did you like . . . ?

4. Use "think back" questions.

Take people back to an experience and not forward to the future.

5. Carefully prepare focus questions

Identify potential questions

Five Types of Questions

1. Opening Question (round robin)
2. Introductory Question
3. Transition Questions
4. Key Questions
5. Ending Questions

6. Ask uncued questions first, cued questions second

Cues are the hints or prompts that help participants recall specific features or details.

7. Consider standardized questions

Sentence completion, conceptual mapping

8. Focus the questions.

Sequence that goes from general to specific

9. Be cautious of serendipitous questions

Consider but be cautious of these. Often best to save for last.

Ending Questions

All things considered question

This question asks participants to reflect on the entire discussion and then offer their positions or opinions on topics of central importance to the researchers.

Examples: "Suppose that you had one minute to talk to the governor on merit pay, the topic of today's discussion. What would you say?" or "Of all the things we discussed, what to you is the most important?"

Summary question

After the brief oral summary the question asked is: "Is this an adequate summary?"

Final question

The moderator reviews the purpose of the study and then asks the participants: "Have we missed anything?"

Systematic Analysis Process

Start while still in the group

- Listen for inconsistent comments and probe for understanding
- Listen for vague or cryptic comments and probe for understanding
- Consider asking each participant a final preference question
- Offer a summary of key questions and seek confirmation

Soon after the focus group--within hours analyze individual focus group

- Make back-up copy of tapes and send tape to transcriber for computer entry if transcript is wanted
- Analyst listens to tape, reviews field notes and reads transcript if available
- Prepare report of the individual focus group in a question-by-question format with amplifying quotes
- Share report for verification with other researchers who were present at the focus group

Later--within days analyze the series of focus groups

- Compare and contrast results by categories of individual focus groups
- Look for emerging themes by question and then overall
- Construct typologies or diagram the analysis
- Describe findings and use quotes to illustrate

Finally, prepare the report

- Consider narrative style versus bulleted style
- Use a few quotes to illustrate
- Sequence could be question by question or by theme
- Share report for verification with other researchers
- Revise and finalize report
- Note themes, hunches, interpretations and ideas
- Compare and contrast this focus group to other groups
- Label and file field notes, tapes and other materials
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Immediately after the focus group

- Draw a diagram of seating arrangement
- Spot check tape recording to ensure proper operation
- Conduct moderator and assistant moderator debriefing

Focus Group Analysis Tips

When conducting this analysis:

Consider the words.

Think about both the actual words used by the participants and the meanings of those words. A variety of words and phrases will be used and the analyst will need to determine the degree of similarity between these responses.

Consider the context.

Participant responses were triggered by a stimulus--a question asked by the moderator or a comment from another participant. Examine the context by finding the triggering stimulus and then interpret the comment in light of that environment. The response is interpreted in light of the preceding discussion and also by the tone and intensity of the oral comment.

Consider the internal consistency.

Participants in focus groups change and sometimes even reverse their positions after interaction with others. This phenomenon rarely occurs in individual interviews due to a lack of interaction from other participants. When there is a shift in opinion, the researcher typically traces the flow of the conversation to determine clues that might explain the change.

Consider the frequency or extensiveness of comments.

Some topics are discussed by more participants (extensiveness) and also some comments are made more often (frequency) than others. These topics could be more important or of special interest to participants. Also, consider what wasn't said or received limited attention. Did you expect and not receive comments?

Consider the intensity of the comments.

Occasionally participants talk about a topic with a special intensity or depth of feeling. Sometimes the participants will use words that connote intensity or tell you directly about their strength of feeling. Intensity may be difficult to spot with transcripts alone because intensity is also communicated by the voice tone, speed and emphasis on certain words. Individuals will differ on how they display strength of feeling and for some it will be a speed or excitement in the voice whereas others will speak slowly and deliberately. One of the clues to intensity is when an individual varies their past speaking pattern. For example: non-talkers start speaking, slow speakers talk faster, fast talkers speak slowly, quiet speakers talk louder, etc.

Consider the specificity of responses.

Responses that are specific and based on experiences should be given more weight than responses that are vague and impersonal. To what degree can the respondent provide details when asked a follow up probe? Greater attention is often placed on responses that are in the first person as opposed to hypothetical third person answers. For example, "I feel the new practice is important because I have used it and been satisfied," has more weight than, "These practices are good and people in the area should use them."

Find the big ideas.

The researcher can get so close to a multitude of comments and details that trends or ideas that cut across the entire discussion are missed. One of the traps of analysis is not seeing the big ideas. It may be helpful to take a few steps back from the discussions by allowing an extra day for the big ideas to percolate. For example, after finishing the analysis the researcher might set the report aside for a brief period and then jot down the three or four of the most important findings. Assistant moderators or others skilled in qualitative analysis might review the process and verify the big ideas.

Reporting Focus Group Results

Use a communications strategy

Rather than thinking of "a report," think of what type of communication strategy is needed. A variety of reports might be used to keep people informed. Consider: e-mail messages, postcards, phone calls, bulleted summaries, selected quotes, moderator comments, mid-project or final project reports, personal visits by members of the research team, etc.

Use an appropriate reporting style that the client finds helpful and meets expectations

Ask users what kind of report would be helpful to them. What information are they looking for? What are the expectations and traditions of reports within the organization?

Strive for enlightenment

Reports should raise the level of understanding of the client. The purpose is more to enlighten and convey new insights as opposed to repeating common knowledge which is already known by the sponsor of the study.

Make points memorable

Help client remember the key points by limited the number of points you highlight. Too many points diminish overall impact. Begin with most important points and follow with lesser important points.

Use narrative or bulleted format

Written reports can follow either a narrative format or a bulleted format. Don't surprise the client with a format different from what is expected.

Give thought to the oral report

Oral reports should be brief, clear and concise. In addition, oral reports should allow opportunity for questions, indicate why the study is important and why the findings are meaningful, begin with the most important findings and engage the listener in an active manner.

