Module 3b: Focus Groups
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Activity

- In small groups, interpret the following survey item (what does it mean to you and what do you consider when you answer?):

  “During the current school year, about how often have you had discussions with people with political views other than your own?”

  Very often / Often / Sometimes / Never
Examples of Focus Groups

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wguSXbUe2hw

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_cdqiH2OM34

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TDaLbA3bwPY

Use of Focus Groups in Assessment

Wabash National Study used standardized surveys and tests, and existing institutional data.

One of the most important lessons was “how much you can learn by sitting informally with groups of students and asking them to reflect on some of your institutional data or to respond to simple questions like, ‘what things have faculty and staff done that have made a difference in what you have learned this year?’”

Why Use a Focus Group?

- Seek to understand perceptions
  - Perceptions are not “right” or “wrong”
- Looking for depth and detail that cannot be provided in another way
- Seek to better understand findings from another assessment method
- Need to develop instrument but don’t know where to start
When to Use a Focus Group?

- Before a study (pilot or part of instrument development - exploratory)
- During a study or as a stand-alone study (to address a planned set of questions)
- After a study (to better understand responses already received - explanatory)

Examples

- Student Activities wants to create an instrument on students' satisfaction with sustainability programming
- Focus groups are held in the middle of a semester-long leadership program to see if program needs modifications
- In a survey students say they are not writing as many papers as at peer institution – want to know how students understand “papers” and if they are including other types of projects

Other Uses

- Try out new products or campaigns
- Feedback on promotional materials, usability of websites or apps
- Pilot test an instrument
- Feedback on an instructor during the semester
Focus Groups may NOT be a good choice when...

- Topic is sensitive in nature (participants may not be willing to speak about it in a group)
- Want a direct measure of learning / development (participants can only provide perceptions)
- Want representative sample of participants (may not get unless you perform large number of focus groups – more like a grounded theory study)

Implementing Focus Groups

1. Define a clear purpose
2. Identify and recruit participants
3. Create prompts / activities
4. Hold the focus group
5. Analyze results
6. Report findings

1. Define a Clear Purpose

- What do you want to learn?
  - Clear and specific
  - Knowing what you want to learn will impact all other aspects of the focus group
- Position the focus group within other assessment projects (if applicable, as discussed earlier)
- Depending on the number of topics, may consider multiple groups
2. Participants

• Interaction is key aspect of focus group
  – Need some diversity in focus group, but not too much (where conflict will arise that will squash discussion or participants will be talking about completely different domains)
  – If participants are likely to hold radically different views, might be best to do multiple groups
  – Those who perceive themselves as lower status in the group might not speak up

• Pre-existing groups
  – Can be easier to manage (perhaps more likely to show up and easier to recruit)
  – If all members of similar group (say, LGBTQ), might be more willing to discuss sensitive issues on that topic

• Creating a new group
  – May take time to ‘warm up’
  – Can be more difficult to get consistent attendance
  – Can result in interesting discussions (perhaps more likely to challenge each other or present conflicting views)

• Usually no more than 4-7 participants
• May need to “over-recruit” to allow for no shows
• Somewhat smaller groups okay, start to turn into in-depth interviews (which can be useful too, but is a somewhat different approach)
• Larger groups can become unmanageable
2. Recruitment

- Most challenging part of focus groups
- Don’t have to use random sampling
  - Goal is to identify those participants who can best answer your questions and get them to participate
- Looking for commitment to participate (so you can get the appropriate number of participants), not an “open forum”

2. Recruitment

- Direct method
  - Ask possible participants face-to-face, over the phone, email, to volunteer through paper request, etc.
- Snowball
  - Invite 1-2, then ask for referral or for them to ‘suggest a friend’
- If using existing group, can schedule immediately after existing group’s meeting

2. Recruitment

- Goal is to turn recruits into participants!
- Use multiple reminders (perhaps of different forms) and information sheets / flyers
- Personalize the incentive (such as choice of lunch) so participant has reason to attend
- Incentives (such as lunch or small sum of money) can help turn recruits into participants
  - Importance and relevance of the topic, clearly explained, also very important – appeal to altruism and egoistic approaches
- Can ask participants to do something prior to the event (builds interest and buy-in)
3. Create Prompts

- Want to encourage discussion and interaction regarding your topic
- Start with a “warm-up” to get group comfortable with each other and with topic
- Might also have a task or exercise for the group to complete
  - Using a task can help get over some of the group awkwardness; focus is on understandings and norms, not the task itself
  - Want sufficient structure so the topic is addressed, but not too much so that interaction and discussion is stifled

Sample Tasks or Exercises

- Ranking
  - Group offered a list of statements (on cards), asked to rank in order of importance
- Vignettes
  - Hypothetical cases or scenarios, group asked what course of action should follow
- News bulletin
  - Given series of photos, group produces a news headline relative to your topic of interest
- Photo interpretations
  - Shown photos, asked to interpret what is going on in the photo, what they see
- Respond / interpret comments or items from a survey
- Make your own

3. Create Prompts

- Want to encourage discussion and interaction on your topic
  - How many times have you been to XXXXX? (bad)
  - Please share about your most recent experience at SHS regarding costs and billing
- Have follow-up questions planned in case the group does not bite much on your initial prompt
- Follow-up with additional questions to fully understand the group’s perspective – don’t feel a need to “get to” every question on your list
3. Qualities of Good Prompts

- Conversational, clear, and open-ended
- Avoid jargon, acronyms, technical lingo not understood by participants
- Is well ordered with other questions (avoid jumping around) and engaging or interesting

4. Hold the Focus Group: Facilitator

- Facilitator should be viewed as neutral party by participants and easy to converse with
- I can facilitate or can help you identify someone to facilitate your session

4. Hold the Focus Group

- Have an opening statement to explain the norms of focus groups (discussion with facilitator and each other, safe space, everyone gets a turn, purpose of project)
- Goal of facilitator is not to control, but to encourage the discussion and interaction
- Have 2 pre-set tasks or exercises can help get things going
- Have plenty of back-up or follow-up questions; but don’t want to be question / response like an interview
4. Hold the Focus Group

- Room setup and venue should encourage discussion and interaction
- Take notes or record the session
  - Often helps to have an assistant to take notes in a focus group instead of the facilitator doing both roles
- Keep the group on topic
- Make sure everyone has a chance to speak and be heard
- Probably no more than 45-60 minutes
- Have a closing / wrap-up

To Record or Not To Record?

- Recording of sessions very common in research settings
- Recommend IRB approval if planning on recording (due to the increased risk of identifying a participant)
- Don’t record “just because” – have a plan for transcribing and using the recording
- Make sure your recording device works and can pick up everyone
- Generally not necessary for assessment purposes

4. Managing Bad Behaviors

- Silence (redirect with a new prompt or activity)
- One person dominating (remind group about goal, specifically prompt others to have a chance to speak, don’t look at the rambler or direct question to others in the group)
- Everyone talking at once (redirect, remind group of the goal – hopefully this will not be an issue given the design of the group)
- Violation of social norm / someone becomes offended (consider in advance how you will respond, remind group of norms and purpose, stay on topic – not that likely to occur)
5. Analysis

• If session was recorded, produce a transcript (takes a tremendous amount of time, but can be helpful)
• Thematically analyze in an outline format – but not sequential
• Identify key statements or quotes from your notes
• Goal is to represent the discussion and be able to interpret the meaning

Reporting Findings

• Consider asking participants to review your summary / findings ("member checking")
• Remember when reporting your findings that focus groups represent perceptions; not “right or wrong,” but just perceptions
• If using along with other assessment tools, connect results together as possible into a final summary report

Going Forward

• Developed a “checklist” for teams to use during the planning, development, and implementation of a focus group
• Goal is not to “check” every item on the list – rather goal is to encourage thoughtful reflection and opportunity to catch errors before they occur