

Engaging Students through Focus Groups Methodology

Experiential Learning Activity (ELA)

Student Materials

The Undergraduate Experiential Learning Project



Preparing to Lead Focus Group.

Focus Group Instructions

Objectives of the Assignment

In this assignment you will develop and run a focus group to obtain information about a research topic. Your group will decide on a topic and a research objective, develop research questions, collect data through a focus group with students in another class, and analyze the data obtained to determine findings, and, if possible, make recommendations based on the research findings. Your findings and recommendations about the research topic should reflect knowledge that you obtain directly through the focus group research; however, it should be informed by other available, related studies, including scholarship. This exercise will allow you to draw on your previous coursework and give you the opportunity to apply what you learn through original research to illuminate a real world problem and to make recommendations to address it.

Learning Objectives

Students will gain experience in:

- The utility of a focus group as a research design, as well as its limitations
- Data collection and analysis through a focus group
- Application of theory and research findings to real world concerns or problems
- Audio visual and oral presentation skills
- Collaboration and teamwork

Final Products

- 1) A group audiovisual presentation that describes the research objective, the group process, your aim and questions, your findings, and your recommendations for policy or future research.
- 2) An individual reflection paper that describes the role that you played in the focus group activity and discusses reactions to the focus group process and any changes that should be made before running the focus group again. ■

What is a Focus Group?

We form or are formed into groups all the time. *What is different about a focus group?* A focus group is a special type of group in terms of purpose, size, composition, and procedures. It provides qualitative data through a focused discussion about a topic of interest to a researcher. Focus groups have a history since the 1930s of being used by the military, industry, literacy activists, market research community, academia, and health professionals, among others.

What is the purpose of a focus group?

The purpose of conducting a focus group is to listen, gather information, assemble opinions, and better understand how people feel and think about an issue, product, or service. The focus group is usually conducted several times with similar participants so that the researchers can identify trends and patterns in participants' perceptions and opinions across three or more groups.

Focus Groups:

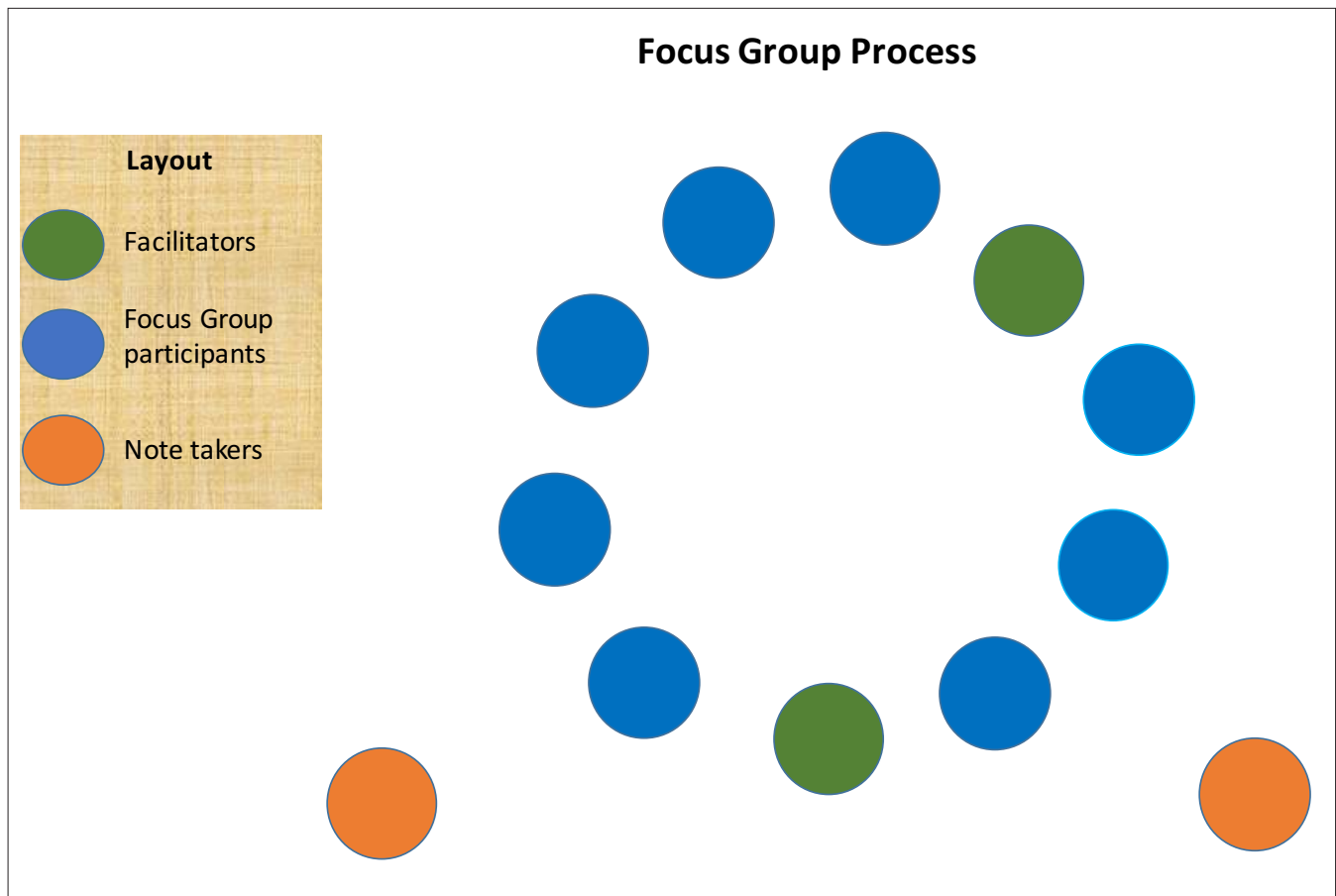
- take place in relaxed, permissive, non-threatening environments in which participants are not pressured to vote or reach consensus;
- encourage participants to share their perceptions and points of view, positive or negative;
- allow for researchers to take less directive, influential, or dominating roles in comparison to one-on-one interviews;
- recognize participants' needs to feel comfortable in order to share information;
- present a more natural environment than that of the individual interview as participants are influencing and influenced by others during the focus group conversation.

The **focus group researcher** is a moderator, listener, observer, facilitator, and then later, an analyst. The researcher must pay attention to the feelings, comments, conversation dynamics, and thought processes of participants as they discuss the issue. ■

Best Practices for Conducting a Focus Group

1. Spend the necessary preparation time creating, phrasing, and sequencing the open-ended questions that will guide the group. Start with general questions and then become more specific or focused. If you are convening the group as a research team, be sure to discuss your roles during the focus group: Who will welcome the participants? Who will ask the questions? Who will take notes? Who will keep time? Who will videotape? Practice saying the questions out loud and imagine the answers that you might hear.
2. An ideal focus group has between 5-10 participants, who have some common characteristic, such as being college students. A circle of chairs in a quiet room is the preferred set-up for a focus group. Participants should sign consent forms prior to the start of the focus group, if that is required by the institution.
3. Briefly introduce yourself as the researcher and convener of the focus group and describe the basic logistics for the group: why the group has been convened; the objective of the group; the length of the focus group; why the group is being audio or video-taped, etc.
4. Briefly describe any further logistics that might be specific to your focus group. For example, you can point out where the restrooms and how long the activity will last. If a participant arrives late, one member of the research team should step outside and provide the individual with a short briefing before escorting the participant into the group.
5. Don't let participants' pauses or silences scare you! You can repeat the questions, but do not improvise or re-word them. Never offer an example of an answer. Simply repeat the question. It will take participants a few moments to digest each question.
6. As happens in groups, one voice may become dominant or another one may not be heard. Strong facilitation skills are needed by the convenor to keep the group on track and outspoken participants in line. When in doubt, call for a five minute break and re-group.

7. Prevent yourself from “correcting” or interrupting a participant or calling on someone directly unless they appear to want to answer.
8. Consider switching up the pace of your focus group with a question that requires greater participant involvement, such as listing, rating items, drawing, creating, or simply writing down one word.
9. End the focus group punctually and thank your participants for their time, thoughts, and energy. Make sure that your participants have a way to contact you after the focus group in case they have questions or concerns.
10. Spend the necessary time after the focus group analyzing the data with your co-researchers. As soon as possible after the focus group, notes taken by the note-takers should be reviewed and fleshed out, and a summary of the findings from the focus group should be written and then reviewed by all team members. ■



Qualities of Good Focus Group Questions

1. Good questions **evoke conversation**.
The focus group will probably start as a question-and-answer session between participants and the convenor and then evolve into a spontaneous conversation in which participants talk to each other and build on each other's comments and experiences.
2. Good questions **use words the participants would use when talking about the issue**.
Avoid acronyms, jargon, and technical lingo; review your questions prior to using them.
3. Good questions **are short, clear, and easy to say**.
Participants need to understand what you're saying! Clarity decreases as the length of the question increases. Make sure you can ask the question without stumbling over words.
4. Good questions are **usually open-ended and one-dimensional**.
Your questions should require more than a few words or a phrase for participants to answer. Be careful not to combine words in a question that you think are synonymous but might be understood as different concepts by participants.
5. Good questions include **clear, well thought-out directions**.
If you ask participants to do something (e.g., write down a list), provide clear instructions and a timeframe, as well as the tools that the participants will need (e.g., pen and paper).

Compiled from:

Denzin, N. K. and Y. S. Lincoln. (2011). *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Krueger, R. A. and M.A. Casey. (2009). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Stewart, D. W., P. N. Shamdasani, and D. W. Rook. (2007). *Focus groups: Theory and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. ■

Strategies for Focus Group Questions

- Choose among alternatives
- Make a list
- Fill in the blank
- Rate with blank card
- Semantic differential
- Projection, fantasy and daydreams
- Draw a picture
- Develop a campaign
- Role playing
- Questions that foster ownership

What can you do...?

From: "Designing and Conducting Focus Group Interviews" by Richard A. Krueger. www.eiu.edu/ihec/Krueger-FocusGroupInterviews.pdf

Focus Group Exercises

Instructions for Data Analysis and Final Products

Your goal as a research team is to produce an analysis of the data you have collected through the focus group activity. First, have a brief conversation about group process. How will you approach this part of the assignment? Then, begin addressing the following questions. You'll want to read through all the questions, then work on them in order.

What are the data?

As a group, identify the notes, summaries, transcripts, and audio and video taped materials. Make corrections and additions and determine if anything else should be done to ready them for analysis. Also have at hand the articles (academic or journalistic) that you identified when you developed your research questions.

What do the data reveal or communicate?

Discuss what you have learned about your topic from the focus group participants. Stick to the data and try to make lists.

Identify: points of energy, themes (including unanticipated), points of agreement, divisions among the

Be sure to note: interesting language; good quotes; laughter; silences

Think about the meaning of: group dynamics, emotional reactions

Is there anything in the data that you don't know how to deal with?

What preliminary conclusions or findings can be identified?

Try to agree on some basic findings that reflect the data. These are sentences that sum up what the data revealed. They can also reflect your analysis. Statements like: "There was general agreement that X..." "Students disagreed sharply on Y..." Highlight at least one issue that is of particular interest in relation to your research topic.

Where do these conclusions lead?

Begin to think about “Recommendations and Further Research.” These can be policy recommendations, suggestions to particular groups (such as activists or parents), and also questions that should be explored in order to build on the research.

How will we communicate about our work?

Determine who will work on the presentation and how you will each have an opportunity to review and edit it. Also, divide up responsibilities for making the presentation itself. ■

Final Products for this Assignment: 1) Group research aim and 6-8 sequenced focus group questions for instructor approval prior to the focus group. 2) Group presentation that describes the research objective, the group process, your aim questions, your findings, and recommendations. 3) individual reflection papers that describe the role that you played in the focus group activity and discuss your reactions to the focus group process and any changes that you would make were you to have the opportunity to run it again.



Mock Focus Group.

About the Project

This Experiential Learning Activity (ELA) has been developed as part of the Undergraduate Experiential Learning Project (UELP), U.S. Department of Education, Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE)-funded initiative that aims to enhance Conflict Analysis and Resolution (CAR) pedagogy in order to improve undergraduate learning.

The CAR field is uniquely positioned to deliver educational experiences that help students make the crucial link between abstract theories and practical application through learning activities such as: conflict mapping, intervention design, role plays, and simulations. The ELAs developed as part of the UELP advance specific learning outcomes, including critical thinking, problem solving, and perspective taking.

Each ELA produced through the UELP has been designed either to augment existing course curricula or to be used as a stand-alone activity. Instructors are encouraged to adapt activities to meet the needs of their specific learning environments, including class size and course objectives.

All UELP project materials are available for public use and may be reproduced without permission. Please ensure that all printed materials display both the FIPSE and George Mason University logos as well as the project URL ([tp://scar.gmu.edu/experientiallearningproject/home](http://scar.gmu.edu/experientiallearningproject/home)).

As your partners in advancing undergraduate education, we are committed to improving the quality of the learning experience and encourage all feedback and recommendations to support that commitment. Additionally, we welcome stories that highlight moments of student insight that arise from participation in these activities. If you are interested in supporting the collection of data for ongoing research, please contact us through our webpage. ■



School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution

3351 N. Fairfax Drive, MS 4D3, Arlington, VA 22201

Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education

1990 K St. NW, 6th Floor, Washington, D.C. 20006