Conducting Focus Groups: A summary of Best Practices & Support Available for UBC's Flexible Learning Initiative

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Summary of Support Options

The Vice President, Students Office is pleased to offer assistance with focus groups about students' flexible learning experiences. This guide summarizes the purpose, strengths, and limitations of focus groups, as well as tips for setting up and running focus groups. Sample focus groups questions are also included.

For flexible learning projects that require minimal assistance, Marcelo Bravo and Katherine Lyon are available to consult through email or meetings as you design your project. We are happy to offer advice, recommend literature, and provide updates on ongoing flexible learning research activities across campus.

If your department or program requires additional support, we may be able to offer more services in some cases. When timing and resources permit, Katherine and Marcelo may be able to moderate and record focus group sessions. Please note that we are not able to offer transcription or analysis services.

Conducting a Focus Group: When & Why?

Focus groups are a particular type of qualitative research method. They rely on data that is produced through semi-structured group interaction in an informal environment facilitated by a trained moderator. The topic is pre-designated and involves flexible open-ended questions that are used to guide the focus group. Like any research method, focus groups have strengths and weaknesses that make them suitable to particular projects and research questions. Below we review the strengths and limitations of focus groups.

Focus Group Strengths

Purposeful Interaction

The interaction between participants is the main feature of focus groups (McLafferty, 2004, p. 187; Morgan, 1996). Interaction can enable rich dialogue and ideas to emerge that could be left undeveloped in an interview. Participants can build on or challenge one another's ideas, encouraging each other to "express, clarify or even to develop particular perspectives" (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 112).

Access to Meaning-Making Processes

Focus groups enable researchers to observe how individuals negotiate meanings. Group discussions can provide insights about not only what participants think, but "how and why they think as they do" (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 104). Group interviews can enable taken-for-granted assumptions and deeply embedded attitudes to emerge that could not otherwise be accessed through observation (Babbie & Banaquisto, 2010, p. 334).

Participant-Driven & Inductive

Group interviews allow researchers to access the language and concepts that participants use to discuss their experiences (McLafferty, 2004, p. 188). Open-ended questions enable participants to ground the discussion in their own frameworks, priorities, opinions, attitudes and beliefs. Because the data is rooted in participants' experiences (particularly in grounded theory approaches), focus groups put researchers in a position to look for emergent themes, issues that are open and unclear, assumptions to be challenged, and perspectives that are left out (Auerbach & Silverman, 2003; Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Focus groups are therefore ideally suited to inductive research for the purpose of generating concepts and knowledge claims (Babbie & Banaquisto, 2010, p. 330; Kitzinger, 1994, p. 116). However, they can also be used to complement other research approaches. It is common for focus groups to be conducted to established appropriate wording and frameworks for questionnaire items being developed for a survey. Focus groups can also be used to interpret the results of previously conducted quantitative research, often when the 'how' and 'why' of a broader pattern needs to be explored.

Practical

Because focus groups include 4-10 participants per session, they are an efficient and low cost method of generating rich data (Babbie & Banaquisto, 2010, p. 334).

Focus Group Limitations

Moderator Training

Focus groups require a delicate balance of rapport, mutual respect, and openness. Moderators must be trained to create an environment conducive to individual sharing and collaborative dialogue (Babbie & Banaquisto, 2010, p. 336; Krueger, 1988, p. 44-45). Moderators must also be prepared to gently interject in the discussion to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to participate. Attention must be paid to both the more assertive as well as the quieter participants to ensure no one is dominating or excluded from the conversation. While skillfully guiding the conversation as needed, moderators must also avoid finishing participants' sentences or jumping to conclusions about participants' intended meanings.

Researcher Control

The open-ended, participant-guided nature of focus groups is one of this method's biggest assets. However, it also means that researchers have less control over the data generation process in comparison to individual interviews. The researcher must be comfortable with this lack of control, and the research question must be well-suited to inductive logic.

Data Limitations

Focus groups enable researchers to understand how participants make meaning out of their lives and experiences. This rich data is not intended for generalization, but is ideal for producing new concepts and ideas to be explored through additional methods and future projects.

Practical Considerations

Groups can be challenging to assemble because the schedules of all participants must be coordinated. Extra time should be built into the project timeline for scheduling difficulties.

Data can be difficult to transcribe and analyze if it is not clear who is speaking or if participants speak over one another. To limit this ambiguity, moderators can ask participants to say their name each time they speak. Ground rules can also be set at the beginning of the session to encourage participants to allow one another to finish speaking before they add their own point.

Preparing For Your Focus Group

Recruiting Participants

Number of Participants

Focus groups usually consist of four to ten participants per group. Even with this goal in mind, attendance will be influenced by participants' availability and reliability.

Smaller groups are ideal for less experienced facilitators as larger groups can be more challenging to moderate. Smaller groups are also beneficial for discussing complex topics where a large number of issues need to be covered (Babbie & Banaquisto, 2010, p. 334)

Number of Focus Groups

Ideally, focus groups should continue to be conducted until no new issues come up and the data generated becomes repetitive and predictable (i.e.: saturation is reached). Response saturation may occur after any number of studies (Babbie & Banaquisto, 2010, p. 335).

A larger number of focus groups is necessary when you expect there to be a wide variety of perspectives on a topic. If participants bring with them a diversity of life experiences, then a greater number of focus groups will be necessary. If only one or two focus groups are conducted there is a risk that findings will be atypical and would not likely have come up in other groups.

Promotional Materials

Common recruitment materials include posters and email invitations. Previous projects have had success promoting their materials through societies such as the AMS and GSS, as well as by emailing materials for student associations and departments to forward to their student body. Posters can be strategically placed in the Student Union Building, the Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology and departments where students are likely to have classes. Katherine and Marcelo are able to provide samples of promotional materials as needed.

Participants are chosen based on relevance to the topic under study and do not need to be selected through systemic methods since the intention is not statistical representation. The participants do not need to be a representative sample of any given population because the goal is to explore ideas and meanings rather than to definitely explain a phenomenon.

General setting

When booking a room, consider where your participants are likely to be coming from on campus and whether the building has any accessibility issues. Rapport development can begin during the planning stages by ensuring that participants feel that their time and location needs have been taken into account. The ideal room is small enough to feel intimate and has tables and chairs in a circular formation (or that can be moved to a circular formation). Participants also appreciate having a light snack or meal (such as sandwiches, cookies and beverages) provided during the focus group.

One or two clocks or watches, and two recorders will be necessary for each focus group (one for backup in case the other fails). Recorders can be purchased at any electronics store or can often be loaned from faculty technology centers. Smart phones also usually come with high quality recording devices.

Running a Focus Group

Each focus group should be conducted by two trained research assistants, with one taking on the role of facilitator and the other the role of recorder. These roles are complementary to one another and each include particular responsibilities. Ideally, the facilitator and recorder will switch roles for each focus group and develop a system for working together.

Checklist for Room Set-up

The facilitator and recorder can work together to prepare the room based on the following suggested items:

- Participant sign-in sheet
- Participant demographic information form (optional)
- Participant informational letter (or consent form depending on project)
- Nametags & markers
- Catering delivery and set up
- Tables and chairs in a circular formation
- Washrooms located
- Two recorders (tested in the room for sound quality) and extra batteries
- Available clock or watch

Facilitator Responsibilities

Welcoming Participants

As people arrive, introduce yourself, thank them for coming, and encourage them to help themselves to a snack. Let them know what forms to fill out, where the washroom is, and ask if they have any questions. In case your project requires confidentiality, you could have participants select pseudonyms before they write their name tags.

Once everyone has arrived and you are ready to begin the session, here are some points to cover with the group:

- Introduce yourself and the recorder
- Thank participants for being here and generously donating their time
- Review the goals and relevance of the project
- Discuss how their contribution will make a difference
- Emphasize that participants are the experts on their own lives
- State how long the session will take (demonstrate that you respect their time)
- Clarify that participation is voluntary at all times. Participants may choose not to answer any question and you may leave at any point

- Participants can feel free to get up to get food or use the washroom throughout the session (exercise self-care)
- If a consent form is required, review each section of the form briefly and ensure everyone has had a chance to have their questions answered.
- Explain the use of the digital recorders and let participants know when you are going to turn the recorders on
- Ask if there are any questions
- Check the time as you begin with the first question

Spend extra time emphasizing the value of their individual experiences and the contributions their participation will make to the research.

Setting Ground Rules

Establishing group rules at the beginning of the session is essential to creating a productive, respectful environment. Some ground rules are standard (such as "one person speaks at a time") while others can be specific to the particular study or context. Below is a sample list of ground rules:

- To ease transcription and data analysis, please say your own name (or pseudonym) before you speak
- We ask that what is shared in this room stays in this room
- One person speaks at a time
- Please help create an environment where everyone can participate. If you are a quieter person, try to share your ideas as much as possible. You are the expert on your own experience and your opinions are very valuable to us. If you are a person who is able to formulate thoughts quickly and is comfortable speaking up, please be sure to also create verbal space for others to share throughout the session.
- Please speak slowly to help everyone follow the conversation. At UBC we have a variety of ELL students (English language learners) and EFL students (English as a first language) and it is important that everyone can participate
- All answers are valid (there is no right and wrong when talking about experiences, needs, ideas)
- All perspectives on an issue are valuable for this research
- Would anyone like to suggest an additional ground rule?
- Are there any questions?

Building Rapport

The rapport developed within the group has a powerful influence on how participants will answer questions and interact with one another. Although setting ground rules and welcoming participants also contributes to building rapport, there are still some additional steps to be taken to enhance ease of communication. A well-chosen, short, low-pressure activity can help participants become more comfortable speaking in the group.

Feel free to develop your own icebreaker, or use a simple idea like this: Have everyone go around in a circle explaining what animal they would choose to be if they could live as an animal for 1 day (the facilitator can choose to participate as well). This activity is quick and sets an informal tone, and usually leads to a few laughs.

If you are short for time, the opening activity can be related to your topic of study. For instance, you could have physical images of learning environments printed on cards (large classroom, small classroom, outdoors, computer lab, etc.) and have participants work together to rank the images from most ideal to least ideal. This requires discussion and teamwork, and is a valuable source of data about meaning-making.

Managing the Discussion

Listen Actively

Active listening is key to validating participants' contributions and ensuring you are able to stay on top of the conversation. Demonstrate your investment in participants' responses by leaning forward and shifting your shoulders and feet to face the person speaking. Carefully paying attention to the conversation will also enable you to more fully understand participants' perspectives in order to evaluate when to ask participants to clarify or expand, and to determine what question to ask next.

Express Neutrality

Although it is important to respond to participants' comments and to assist in maintaining the discussion, it is equally important to ensure that you do not indicate a preference for some comments over others. Neutrality can be maintained by thanking people for their contribution rather than commenting on the merit of the contribution of itself. Avoid praising a comment or providing your own perspective that might bias the group thinking. Instead, keep the conversation going by briefly repeating the comment, asking the participant to expand, clarify or give an example, and/or asking if others had similar or different experiences. You can also gradually reduce your role in the conversation by encouraging participants to address one another rather than the facilitator.

Silence can be a useful tool for a facilitator. A pause can encourage the person who last spoke to expand their thought and it can also prompt others to contribute their own ideas. Silence should not necessarily be viewed as negative; it can provide an opportunity for participants to think through a question or issue before responding.

Encourage Equal Contributions

The goal of the facilitator is to interfere in the conversation as little as possible while ensuring that participation is balanced and productive. There are several professional, gentle ways to manage the conversation if some participants are dominant. If there are quiet participants, address questions in their general direction using body language, but avoid calling them out directly, which could make them feel uncomfortable. At the end of your question, you can also state, “It would be great if we could hear from some people who haven’t spoken recently.” After some participants have responded to your question, pause to ask the rest of the group if they would like to add anything. Leave up to 10 seconds for more hesitant individuals to respond.

In cases where the entire group seems to be in agreement, take steps to ensure that individuals aren’t feeling pressured to conform. Probe for different experiences, or different ways of thinking about the issue at hand. Take a moment to repeat the ground rule that everyone’s experience is valid for the project and that different opinions create opportunities for productive discussion. If necessary, try to work in a question to tackle the same issue from a different angle later in the session. It is detrimental to the research if opposing views are silenced in focus group interactions.

Manage Time

To stay on top of the time, make a note of the time after you ask each question. Regularly evaluate what direction the discussion is going in, what questions have already been directly and indirectly addressed, and what question(s) should come next. Depending on how structured the project is, the facilitator may have varying degrees of freedom to skip or modify questions depending on relevance and time constraints.

Build in a support system by developing signals with the recorder based on time and group dynamics. The recorder offers a valuable set of eyes to help guide the session.

Let the group know when they are getting close to the end of the session. This encourages them to say important things they may not have said yet, and ensures that they won’t be surprised when it is time to wrap up.

Concluding the Session

Try to manage your time to leave a few minutes to ask participants if they would like to share anything they haven’t already been asked about. Bring the session to a close by asking if participants have any final questions and thanking them again for their valuable participation.

Reflecting on the Session

Take 10-15 minutes after the session to draft some notes with the recorder. Notes can include a summary of key ideas that emerged, challenges you faced in moderating the discussion, and any dynamics influencing participants’ interactions and responses. This is also a great opportunity to reflect on which questions worked the best and which may need to be modified for clarify and relevance. This reflection is meant to add context in later stages of the analysis when the researcher is working primarily with a transcript rather than the actual participants.

Recorder Responsibilities

Moderation Support

A key component of the recorder's role is to support the facilitator in moderating the focus group. Specific needs may shift depending on the group dynamics. Prior to the focus group, the facilitator and recorder can work together to develop signals to indicate if an issue needs to be addressed regarding time management or group dynamics. The recorder can feel free to participate in the discussion with a probe or clarifying question when needed, or to assist the moderator in managing dominant and quiet participants. A variety of other roles may emerge for the recorder through the session. For instance, both the facilitator and recorder can greet people if several participants arrive at once.

Note-taking

The recorder is responsible for documenting the focus group interactions minute by minute during the session. The notes they create will include the time, name (or pseudonym) of the person speaking, the first few words they say, and relevant non-verbal cues (Babbie & Banaquisto, 2010, p. 336). The recorder's notes provide invaluable context later in the study when the researchers are working from a transcript and require additional insight into discussion dynamics. If the recording device were to malfunction, the recorder's notes provide a replacement of the general points that were shared during the session. Recorders can use a pen and paper or a laptop to make notes. Livescribe smart pens, if within the project budget, enable recorders to capture voice recording and writing at the same time.

Reflecting on the Session

The recorder and facilitator can debrief for 10-15 minutes after the session as they write the session summary together (see 'Reflecting on the Session' under 'Facilitator Responsibilities'). The recorder usually has a different perception of the focus group than the facilitator since they sit across from one another in the circle and engage with the participants in different ways. If the recorder and facilitator agree, the recorded can provide the facilitator with constructive suggestions based on their perspective of the focus group.

Post-Session Deliverables

After the session, it is frequently the recorder's responsibility to deliver the recordings, focus group summary, participant sign-in sheet, and any other forms to the project lead. The project lead usually coordinates transcription and the secure storage of focus group recordings and documents in a locked cabinet.

Focus Group Interview Question Guides

Focus group interview guides usually consist of 6-10 questions, with additional probes under some of the questions that the moderator can use to deepen, clarify or extend the discussion. Probes are particularly useful for less experienced moderators who may be less confident in their ability to maintain discussion.

For research on students' learning experiences, the VP Students office is pleased to provide the following set of sample focus group questions based on four central themes:

1. Engagement – content and context
2. Pedagogy
3. Assessment, Feedback, Evaluation
4. Workload

These focus group themes and questions were used for the "Student's Experience of Flexible Learning" research project in the summer of 2014. Please feel free to modify these questions based on the needs of your project.

Focus Group Guide for: Engagement – Content and Context

Prior to beginning the focus group, be sure to thank participants for coming and review the discussion ground rules. Also let participants know that they can leave at any time and are not required to answer questions they don't want to answer. Ask for consent to record the session and leave a few minutes for participants to ask questions.

General section on teaching and learning:

1. Take a moment to think about a time when you learned a new concept. What made this a memorable learning experience for you?
    - What do consider to be a valuable approach to learning?
    - What enables you to really learn a new idea?
    - How has workload influenced your learning experiences?

2. In a post-secondary context:
    - What do you think the students' role should be in the teaching and learning process?
    - What do you think the instructors' role should be in the teaching and learning process?

Specific section on engagement:

3. How do you know when you are engaged in class?
    - What makes you feel unengaged in class?

4. What role can students play in a course to be more active?
    - It is desirable for students to be active learners in a course?

5. Do you think that TA's play an important role in your courses?
    - Why or why not?

6. Are your peers part of your learning community?
    - Should peers be part of your learning community?
    - Or do you mostly try to figure things out on your own?

7. What are some strategies for engaging students in course material, so they're not just coming to class and taking notes?
    - Strategies professors can use?
    - Strategies students can use?

Focus Group Guide for: Pedagogy

Prior to beginning the focus group, be sure to thank participants for coming and review the discussion ground rules. Also let participants know that they can leave at any time and are not required to answer questions they don't want to answer. Ask for consent to record the session and leave a few minutes for participants to ask questions.

General section on teaching and learning:

1. Take a moment to think about a time when you learned a new concept. What made this a memorable learning experience for you?
    a. What do consider to be a valuable approach to learning?
    b. What enables you to really learn a new idea?
    c. How has workload influenced your learning experiences?

2. In a post-secondary context:
    - What do you think the students' role should be in the teaching and learning process?
    - What do you think the instructors' role should be in the teaching and learning process?

Specific section on pedagogy:

3. What makes a good instructor?
   a. What are his/her approaches?
   b. What are his/her dispositions?
   c. How does he/she engage with the students? With the course?

4. What does a “flipped” classroom mean to you? *(provide details after everyone has spoken)*

5. If you could imagine an ideal learning environment, what would that look like?
   a. How would it be laid out?
   b. Where would it be?
   c. How would it feel?
   d. Have you experienced this ideal environment before?

6. Tell me about an experience of collaboration with other students (e.g. group assignment, discussion) that was positive or negative for you.
   a. What made it positive/negative?

7. What are your thoughts of more computer-based presence in the learning that takes place for a course? (e.g. pre-class videos, assignments, forums)
   - Would that be useful in your discipline?

Focus Group Guide for: Assessment, Feedback and Evaluation

Prior to beginning the focus group, be sure to thank participants for coming and review the discussion ground rules. Also let participants know that they can leave at any time and are not required to answer questions they don’t want to answer. Ask for consent to record the session and leave a few minutes for participants to ask questions.

General section on teaching and learning:

1. Take a moment to think about a time when you learned a new concept. What made this a memorable learning experience for you?
   a. What do consider to be a valuable approach to learning?
   b. What enables you to really learn a new idea?
   c. How has workload influenced your learning experiences?

2. In a post-secondary context:
   - What do you think the students’ role should be in the teaching and learning process?
   - What do you think the instructors’ role should be in the teaching and learning process?

Specific section on assessment, feedback and evaluation:

3. What sorts of feedback would be useful to enhance your experience in a course?
    a. How often?
    b. Who would given this feedback? (Instructor, TA, other students?)

4. What would be positive/negative aspects of receiving feedback from your peers?
    a. Have you ever participated in giving or receiving peer-feedback?

5. In your experience, does the feedback you've received during the course of the semester shape/inform how you engage with the material from that point forward?

6. Have you had any experience with self-assessment in a course?
    a. Do you think there is value in doing self-assessments?

7. There are different models of how students' are assessed in a course (assignments, participation, exams, etc.) How would you like to be assessed in a course?
    a. In your experiences, what approaches to assessment have been fair or unfair?

Focus Group Guide for: Workload

Prior to beginning the focus group, be sure to thank participants for coming and review the discussion ground rules. Also let participants know that they can leave at any time and are not required to answer questions they don't want to answer. Ask for consent to record the session and leave a few minutes for participants to ask questions.

General section on teaching and learning:

1. Take a moment to think about a time when you learned a new concept. What made this a memorable learning experience for you?
    a. What do consider to be a valuable approach to learning?
    b. What enables you to really learn a new idea?
    c. How has workload influenced your learning experiences?

2. In a post-secondary context:
    - What do you think the students' role should be in the teaching and learning process?
    - What do you think the instructors' role should be in the teaching and learning process?

Specific section on workload:

3. What do you think is the relationship between the workload in a course and the level of learning?

4. Can you tell me about a course where the workload was high/low – what was your overall experience in that course?

5. What should an instructor be considering when they determine the workload for a course?

6. In what ways do you balance the stress of your course workload with other aspects of your life?

7. When is a heavy course workload valuable and when is it not?

Ethical Considerations

Research with human participants may require institutional ethics approval from a UBC-affiliated Research Ethics Board (REB) prior to conducting interviews or focus groups. <u>It is important to determine whether the project/study requires ethics approval prior to starting the required activities.</u> This is necessary because the University of British Columbia is governed by Policy #89 and the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS): Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans.

To assess whether your project is likely to require ethics review, please visit the following link: http://ethics.research.ubc.ca/sites/ore.drupalprod.webi.it.ubc.ca/files/uploads/BREB_ChecklistForResearchRequiringEthicsReview.pdf

Research Ethics Boards (REBs) are independent committees established by the University, in partnership with its affiliated hospitals and research institutes. Acting on behalf of these institutions, REBs are authorized to review the ethical acceptability of research and to approve, reject, propose modifications to, or terminate any proposed or ongoing research involving human participants.

If there is any doubt as to whether the overall study requires Institutional Ethics Review, and/or participants' informed consent, please contact appropriate staff in the UBC-affiliated research ethics boards below.

Key Contacts:

- UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board Manager: Shirley Thompson (shirley.thompson@ors.ubc.ca; ph: 604 827 5112)

- Clinical Research Ethics Board Manager: Pia Ganz (pia.ganz@ors.ubc.ca; ph: 604 875 4149)

- BC Cancer Agency Research Ethics Board Manager: Bonnie Shields (bshields@bccancer.bc.ca; ph: 604 877 6284)

- Children's & Women's Hospital Research Ethics Board Manager, Jennie Prasad (jprasad@cfri.ubc.ca; 604 875 2441)

- PHC Research Ethics Board Manager, Michelle Storms (mstorms@providencehealth.bc.ca; 604 682 2344, ext. 63496).

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