Focus group seminar
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Mathematics Study Centre, UTS

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Context

I will give a kind of overview of focus groups and then we will do a case study, if you like, using a computer-based technique presented by Michelle Lee. I am presenting this paper from the stance of a practitioner, rather than a theoretician. I will look at basic practicalities of focus groups, and say a bit about how they differ from other techniques. I am also proceeding on the assumption that you, as researchers, may need to organise and facilitate focus groups yourselves.

As an example of the range of situations where one can use focus groups, I have been involved with running them for environment groups on various issues – these are usually termed "workshops", but they are in effect a form of focus group. The idea there is to canvass local residents' opinions on, say, a proposed development, along with their views on acceptable solutions. I have also organised and facilitated focus groups for UTS about education issues with high school and University students as well as academics. I have been working lately on a cross-faculty project at UTS, under the direction of the Mathematics and Physics Departments, where focus groups with students has been part of the research process.

Ethical considerations

The main ethical considerations are that participation should be voluntary; and it should be anonymous.

It should be remembered that the people who participate in any focus group are doing the researcher a favour. This is true even where some kind of incentive is offered. With students, you might give them a free lunch (which proves there is no such thing as a free lunch!), or in marketing groups they may be given payment, but the participants are still there under their own volition. It is important to avoid any hint of coercion. This means that people should always be given the opportunity to leave the group – even partway through – if they choose to. This should be stated at the beginning of the interview. Even if they leave halfway, you have their opinions on at least part of the subject area.

I also always state quite clearly at the beginning of any focus group that all comments will be anonymous, and I ensure that that is so. I usually tell them my name, but state that I do not want to know theirs. For some reason, there is always some participant who finds this really amusing and will make references to "Mr X" who has been speaking, and then falls about laughing. So, in fact, it can function as an icebreaker as well. The reason, of course, is to protect participants' privacy. With students, it is to ensure they do not feel they will be punished for criticising. It has ethical weight, but it also serves to free the participants up to some degree in stating their opinions.

Focus groups – what are they?

Focus groups essentially involve getting a bunch of people together – not too big, not too small – to discuss a particular subject area. A set of questions is developed, then each group is led by an interviewer (or facilitator, or moderator – there are a number of terms used) who guides the group through the process. They could be described as a group discussion, or a group conversation.

Focus groups are mainly used in the arenas of marketing, social issues, and education. The intended outcome in any of these is usually to effect change of some kind. They are a qualitative form of research used essentially as a fishing expedition in a situation where you are not really sure what people actually think about the area you are investigating. What they will not really do is give you the numbers of people in a population who hold a particular opinion. Their main use is instead to establish the **range** of opinions that are held about the issue. You can make some generalisations if you are getting general support for a particular position, but you need to be careful about that.

The point of having a group is really to stimulate alternative opinions, or new ideas the participants (and the researchers) had not thought of. This happens with any interview since the interview itself sets off a train of thought, but in this case it is not only the interviewer who is stimulating new views but also the other members of the group. Anecdotal evidence suggests that radical views – those at the ends of the spectrum of opinion – are more likely to be revealed in one-on-one interviews, but focus groups should give you the range of commonly held opinion.

There is the opportunity to follow trails further than with a questionnaire, as the interviewer responds to points raised by members of the group. You can get more expansive answers in a face-to-face situation, as opposed to an anonymous questionnaire. For instance, in the cross-faculty project I mentioned, we sent out the same questions, more or less, by email to students, and basically received one-line answers. The same problem could apply with the computer-moderated method Michelle will present.

Another benefit is they are a cost-effective way of covering a greater number of participants as against individual interviews, mainly since there is less face-to-face interview time. The time taken for the transcription and analysis phases may be reduced as well.

They can of course be used in conjunction with other survey methods. For instance, you could follow up afterwards with a longer one-on-one series of interviews to draw out more information on particular points raised within the focus groups. Focus groups are also sometimes used as a preliminary to writing up a questionnaire, as they are a way of establishing the issues of concern or of getting the language right, that is, finding out how people actually talk about the subject in question.

How to do it

Firstly, try to be as rigorous as you would be with designing any other kind of research. Some of the studies based on focus groups seem to have been flung together with little thought of proper method by people who probably would not dream of such looseness in their own areas of expertise. Consider exactly why you are doing it, is it the appropriate method, what your goals are and what you actually want to find out. The basic steps are:

- establish aims
- work out sample
- develop questions
- organisational details (such as booking rooms, lining up participants)
- run the group/s
- transcription
- categorise the responses
- analyse results

- write up.

Usually 90 minutes is considered a good time, but with, say, Uni students they're used to one hour blocks and this seems to work best. If it is a subject that needs longer exploration, then you may have to hold more than one session. The disadvantage here is that you are then setting up a group that may develop its own identity. The main reason for the length of time is that the process is quite tiring, both for the participants and the interviewer. After a while people's attention tends to wander and there is just not the quality of response if it goes on too long.

I would strongly recommend taping any session, but audio only. This is because you need to concentrate on what they are saying and taking notes is a distraction. It is very hard to both think and listen, and you need to be sure you really do understand the point they are making. The other thing is that because of the flow of the conversation, some people's points may get buried and you may have to remember to get back to them to explain. I have not yet had anyone object to being recorded, once I have explained the reasons for it.

Another good idea is to jot down some notes straight afterwards of the main points, For instance, the tape may not have worked (the interviewer's nightmare!), and it may clarify things later that may be a bit obscure on the tape.

Consideration needs to be given about how much you will tell the participants ahead of the interview. You don't want to influence them too much with any biases you may have, but they need to be sufficiently informed so they don't feel they've been tricked in some way. With some groups, it can be helpful to emphasise that they are helping to effect change – that is, they are contributing something and being useful.

Questions

On the subject of questions that work, the main criterion is that less is more. You really only want to have about 6 to 8 open-ended questions since if you have too many you will not get through them in the time; if you do, it can be at the risk of cutting people short before you have canvassed issues fully. The most important questions really are the first and the last. You need an easy warm-up question that seems reasonably non-threatening, just to get them into the swing of the thing. Then you need a summing up question at the end (such as "do you have any more you'd like to say"). This is to catch points that may have been glossed over earlier, and it can give participants a sense of conclusion and so leave them with a feeling of satisfaction.

It is usual to work from general to the specific; and from the most important to the least.

The best questions are those that are clear and unambiguous, and they need to be short. Beware also of addressing more than one idea in any question, since people are likely to only answer part of the question. If they're all looking at you blankly and clearly have not understand, you will need to paraphrase the question. I find that a certain amount of paraphrasing sometimes gives them time to think about their answer, if they are a bit slow in responding. This is particularly the case where there may be some kind of language barrier.

Types: structured – keep closely to the set of questions, in which case you would use a larger number of questions. Semi-structured is the most common form, where you have open-ended questions with recommended probes for the interviewer to follow up on if they are not mentioned by the group. With a structured format you can

assess the frequencies of opinion within the group by developing a list of opinions, then work out how many think what.

Being a facilitator

One of the main things to watch out for is that everyone gets to have a say, and that there is not 1 or 2 people dominating. In my experience, even where there are those who try to dominate, they are very rarely overbearing or aggressive since people generally try to be polite. They can be given time to have their say – after all, they will have valid points to make – and then you can make sure the discussion moves on to another person. It is the facilitator's job to remain in control and make sure that everyone has an equal say. The alternative difficulty can be people who are overly shy or taciturn – in this case, you should be trying to ensure you directly ask them their opinion (after the others have responded, for instance).

Also make sure you understood people's answers – ask them to clarify if you are not sure, because you may not be able to go back and ask them again. It is often a good idea to repeat back what you think they have said just to make sure. This is also really useful if there's problems with the tape – you are sure to be able to hear yourself!

I mentioned earlier that it is difficult for humans to both listen and think at the same time, but that is exactly what a facilitator needs to do – there is no time to take notes and think about them later. Therefore you need to keep track in your head of what people have said and go back to them if necessary. You can treat some questions in a cursory fashion if you think the group has already answered, though you should give them the chance to expand by asking the question on your list and whether they have any more to say about it.

Sampling

The usual number suggested for a group is 6-12 – although personally I prefer a maximum of 10 – any more and there are problems with the mechanics of getting everyone to speak, while not running on so long that people get bored. It is generally considered that interviewing 20 people will give the full range of opinions, so that means two groups of 10, basically. It is possible to run multiple groups to develop some idea of patterns or consistencies, and this is often done for marketing purposes.

Generally groups of like backgrounds are chosen – first year engineering students, for instance. In some cases, you might decide you want a disparate group with people from a range of backgrounds, in order to spark discussion, but more homogeneous groups tend to work better in my experience. One reason is that if there is too much conflict within the group then some people will be put off and will be hesitant about participating.

The major difficulty is in getting participants. With marketing, they have the advantage of being able to pay people to participate. In the social arena, often the purpose is to gauge opinion and see what solutions would be acceptable, so the people who have an opinion already actually want to participate. However, for many purposes it can be difficult getting sufficient numbers. People may have limited time available – they are busy either having fun or working away with many demands on their time already – and there can be language difficulties which means people may be reticent to volunteer. Food seems to be no incentive (we have tried that route).

Disadvantages

Just a mention of a few potential disadvantages. The primary one, if you are setting up the groups yourself, is that there are a myriad organisational details to take care of. They are very tedious to set up and, perhaps this is obvious, but there are always hiccups. It's best to employ someone!

Further, since one can only deal with a limited number of questions and there is a limited timeframe, it means they can give limited scope. They are not so appropriate if you want to go into an issue in depth; for example they are well-suited as a form of student feedback on subjects, or feedback on specific techniques, but probably not about conceptions of education as a whole. They need to be too precise in scope.

There is a certain degree of conservatism operating. The human reaction is to conform to the perceived norms of a group, so they may not express ideas perceived as being radically different. As I mentioned earlier, the one-on-one interview is less limited by this, although the person may still feel the need to please or even impress the interviewer.

Another drawback is that if you are relying on volunteers, then you are more likely to get those who are confident and articulate, and who probably already have some opinion about the subject. The fact that they are volunteers presents further sampling problems, for instance it may be appropriate to your research to have groups of, say, people of NES background, but this can be difficult to achieve in practice because of the difficulties in building up the numbers due to people's reticence or shyness.

Conclusion

Finally, if you plan on running focus groups yourselves, then I would strongly recommend that you practise beforehand until you feel confident. It can be quite daunting facing a bunch of strangers, so practise as much as you can, with friends, family, whatever. You could start small with a group of two or three if you like, and you can even try out your questions on them. Remember, the interviewer needs to appear assured and in control of the process – the group is relying on you to guide them through it.

References

There are many references in the UTS library on both the theory and organisation of focus groups, in both the marketing and social sciences sections. The marketing books tend to be how-to manuals, while the social science writings have a tendency to emphasise background and case studies. There is quite a useful literature review available online:

Lewis, M. (2000) *Focus Group Interviews in Qualitative Research: A Review of the Literature* (available at http://casino.cchs.usyd.edu.au/arow//arer/002.htm)

A few other references I have found helpful, and which are in the UTS library, are:

Berg, B.L. (1998) *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, Allyn and Bacon, Boston.

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Wolff, B., Knodel, J. and Sittitrai, W. (1993) *Focus Groups and Surveys as Complementary Research Methods – A Case Example*, in "Successful Focus

Groups – Advancing the state of the art" (Ed, Morgan D.L.) Sage Publications, Newbury Park, U.S.A.