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Focus groups are moderated meetings of 'involved' people discussing their experience of an educational intervention. They are a useful tool for formative/developmental or summative/retrospective evaluation and can serve as a single, self-contained method or link to other evaluation activities.

Uses

Main advantage: obtaining a large amount of interactive information on a topic comparatively easily, within a short time.

- ◆ Generating hypotheses
- ◆ Developing interview schedules
- ◆ Identifying key issues
- ◆ Developing emergent themes
- ◆ Illuminating quantitative responses
- ◆ 'Learner centred' course development
- ◆ Getting reflective feedback on interim interpretations of study outcomes

Main disadvantage: the setting is not 'natural' but deliberate.

Process

1. Define issues for focus

Start with broad themes which can be made explicit to the groups, keep a checklist of individual points of concern to prompt for, if they don't emerge naturally.

Participants will (usually!) be volunteers, it is a good idea to provide lunch!

2. Identify participants from relevant population

Try to make these representative of various types of 'user', i.e. different motivations, different entry levels, different learning environments ...

As moderator, bring in an appropriate degree of 'orchestration' – too much direction strangles disclosure and discussion. Too little, and leaders will emerge from the participant group.

3. Design the sessions

Set group size – between 6 and 12 is recommended.

Decide whether mixed groups or contrastive groups will best serve your need, comparing similar groups to check agreement or distinct groups to establish perspectives on issues.

Decide on structuring strategy – one or two broad topics, or a guided programme for discussion within allocated timeslots? Let conversation flow, if purpose is exploration. Eliciting sequenced 'rounds' of input if there is already a strong agenda to the study, if extremes within, align according to need.

The data will be 'rich' so it is best not to set too many focus items for one sitting.

Define required analysis level – qualitative, 'ethnographic' or systematic content coding, or a combination of these, depending on goals and resourcing.

Decide on recording options – notes? audio recorded? video-recorded?



Whether orchestrating or directing, try not to get drawn in to discussing the issues yourself. Don't play dumb, but acknowledge your need to learn from their experience, and listen!

4. Stage the sessions!

The most important thing is to be both confident, and relaxed – then they will be too.

5. Transcribe records

Verbatim, expressing as written text, or noting against pre-defined criteria whilst listening to/watching tape.

6. (Code and) analyse transcripts

Start with two, and examine closely to establish most useful breakdown of detail in terms of evaluation targets. Broad possibilities are by topic theme, or by participant type. When procedure agreed, test it against remaining transcripts – does it cover the data?

Whilst interpreting, and before reporting findings, it is important to check back with at least some participants to see if their perception of the 'end position' of a meeting concurs with yours.

7. Interpret findings

Integrate with other outcomes from other methods used.

Report your recommendations.

Variations

Multistage groups, where participants are brought back for more than one session, with comparison between first and later sessions. Good for developmental evaluation.

Second-order groups, mixing participants from different previous groups, where the structuring could relax slightly to see what surfaces from earlier sessions.

Other Relevant Pages

Recipes

- Nominal group technique
- Concept maps
- Interviews
- Confidence logs
- Planning trials

Information Pages

- Transcribing
- Interviewing
- Student sample
- Pedagogical toolkit
- Isolation or integration
- Working with groups

Serving suggestions

References