

FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY

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In the following document, Hanover Research presents a guide on focus group methodology.

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OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

ABC has commissioned Hanover Research to provide training on focus groups to administrators who will work with constituents to gather data on various topics. This module presents the components related to preparing for a focus group, facilitating a focus group, and analyzing focus group data.

LITERATURE BRIEF

Focus groups bring together specific contributors to generate a range of ideas and insights about a central topic of interest. They can be used independently of or in conjunction with other research methodologies.

Key skills for moderating a focus group include group management and note-taking. The WBI Evaluation Group (2007) highlights several specific techniques to manage group discussions, including nominal group technique, critical incident technique, SWOT, Delphi technique, brainstorming, straw polls, and round robin reporting.¹ Each technique offers a different way to encourage participants to relate to each other and thus generate new and important knowledge about the central topic. Some sources encourage focus groups to employ an assistant moderator to manage recording and note-taking, such that the moderator is free to engage solely in helping the conversation take shape.² Others have highlighted the importance of making note of peripheral behaviors and interactions to the central topic, such as group dynamic³ and body language.⁴

Experts have bemoaned, however, a relative lack of research on the *analysis* of focus group data, which may also belie **the importance of data-gathering techniques used** during focus group moderation. Vicsek (2010) has discussed, for example, the problems of quantifying

¹ "Managing Focus Groups." WBI Evaluation Group. 2007. pp. 2-3.

http://siteresources.worldbank.org/WBI/Resources/213798-1194538727144/6Final-Focus_Groups.pdf

² "Guidelines for Conducting a Focus Group." Eliot & Associates. 2005. p. 7.

https://assessment.trinity.duke.edu/documents/How_to_Conduct_a_Focus_Group.pdf

³ [1] Farnsworth, J., and Boon, B. "Analyzing group dynamics within the focus group." *Qualitative Research* 10(5): Oct 2010, pp. 605-624. <http://qrj.sagepub.com/content/10/5/605.abstract>

[2] Belzile, J.A., and Öberg, G. "Where to begin? Grappling with how to use participant interaction in focus group design." *Qualitative Research* 12(4): Aug 2012, pp. 459-472. <http://qrj.sagepub.com/content/12/4/459.abstract>

[3] Wibeck, V., Dahlgren, M.A., and Öberg, G. "Learning in focus groups: an analytical dimension for enhancing focus group research." *Qualitative Research* 7(2): May 2007, pp. 249-267.

<http://qrj.sagepub.com/content/7/2/249.abstract>

[4] Halkier, B. "Focus groups as social enactments: integrating interaction and content in the analysis of focus group data." *Qualitative Research* 10(1): Feb 2010, pp. 71-89. <http://qrj.sagepub.com/content/10/1/71.abstract>

⁴ [1] Sagoe, D. "Precincts and Prospects in the Use of Focus Groups in Social and Behavioral Science Research."

Qualitative Report 17(29): 2012, pp. 1-16. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ974852.pdf>

[2] Moretti, F., et al. "A standardized approach to qualitative content analysis of focus group discussions from different countries." *Patient Education & Counseling* 82(3): Mar 2011, pp. 420-428.

focus group data as well as issues related to quoting focus group participants.⁵ “Focus groups generally provide qualitative data about feelings, attitudes, perceptions, or ideas,” writes Marrelli (2008), “rather than verifiable, objective data such as facts and figures.”⁶ Similar concerns were raised by Thackeray and Neiger (2004) in the health education context. The authors argue that focus groups must be approached systematically, with a research-based “focus group interview guide” applied across all hosted groups, among other recommendations.⁷ Some specific analytical methods have been proposed, such as the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss) employed by Ambrose University in their study of student engagement,⁸ and other forms of qualitative content analysis.⁹

Analysis considerations can be addressed in the planning phase of focus group design. **Practitioners recommend that planning begins six to eight weeks prior to desired implementation**, involving tasks such as “writing the purpose statement, identifying the participants, and gathering the contact information.”¹⁰ Such planning allows practitioners to clarify the goals and uses of focus groups within the larger set of study tools (e.g., surveys, interviews, document review). Training materials from the Rapid Policy Assessment & Responses initiative (2004), for example, highlight the impact of timing on the use of focus groups to generate, test, or validate hypotheses at different stages in the rollout of a program.¹¹

Focus groups must be approached systematically, with a research-based focus group interview guide applied across all hosted groups.

⁵ Vicsek, L. “Issues in the Analysis of Focus Groups: Generalisability, Quantifiability, Treatment of Context and Quotations.” *The Qualitative Report* 15(1): Jan 2010, pp. 122-141. ProQuest Education.

⁶ Marrelli, A.F. “Collecting Data Through Focus Groups.” *Performance Improvement* 47(4): Apr 2008, pp. 39-45. ProQuest Education.

⁷ Thackeray, R., and Neiger, B.L. “Misconceptions of Focus Groups: Implications for Health Education Practice.” *American Journal of Health Education* 35(4): Jul/Aug 2004, pp. 214-219. ProQuest Education.

⁸ Wong, A.C.K. “Understanding Students’ Experiences in Their Own Words: Moving Beyond a Basic Analysis of Student Engagement.” *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 45(2): 2015, pp. 60-80. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1073599.pdf>

⁹ Cho, J.Y., and Lee, EH. “Reducing Confusion about Grounded Theory and Qualitative Content Analysis: Similarities and Differences.” *Qualitative Report* 19(64): 2014, pp. 1-20. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ974852.pdf>

¹⁰ Del Rio-Roberts, M. “How I Learned to Conduct Focus Groups.” *The Qualitative Report* 16(1): Jan 2011, pp. 312-315. ProQuest Education.

¹¹ “Module III: Qualitative Data – Focus Groups – Training Materials.” Rapid Policy Assessment & Response. August 1, 2004. p. 5. http://www.temple.edu/lawschool/phrhc/rpar/tools/english/Module%20III_training.pdf

PLANNING A FOCUS GROUP

This section, and those that follow, correspond with each segment in the focus group training module. Across these segments the training combines lecture and hands-on exercises to allow participants to identify and practice essential focus group concepts, as well as opportunities to pause and discuss to ground new knowledge in each participant's experiences. Training segments are informed by and relay essential research-based evidence for best practices in focus group facilitation.

DO I NEED A FOCUS GROUP?

Focus groups are a time- and resource-intensive methodology to choose. They require a high level of coordination among research team members and on the part of participants, and high skill on the part of the selected facilitator. Focus groups are *not* easy!

At first glance, these group interviews appear to save time and resources compared to an individual interview methodology, but group dynamics can influence the quality and quantity of information returned. Focus groups can be useful for identifying and exploring beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, and for identifying topics of interest or concern that can be addressed in follow-up work (e.g., surveys, interviews). However, the number of questions that can be addressed in a focus group is smaller than the number that can be addressed in other methodologies that focus on a sole respondent as an observational unit. Focus groups can help identify the range of beliefs, ideas, or opinions in a population, but the facilitator has little control over the discussion compared to what s/he might have in another methodology.

A focus group *is* an opportunity to hear a group identify and explore its ideas, opinions, and experiences related to a common topic. A focus group *is not* a debate, a group therapy session, a place to resolve conflicts or problems, or an opportunity for participants to collaborate.

There are three types of questions asked during a focus group: engagement, exploration, and wrap-up. The most important of these is "exploration," or questions that openly ask respondents to share their experiences, ideas, opinions, or beliefs. Engagement questions serve to help participants feel at ease with the group and setting; wrap-up questions serve to capture elements that respondents feel are important but could not be addressed in the allotted time. If exploratory questioning is not the most important aspect of a research project, then focus groups are not the right choice.

Focus groups are a qualitative data-gathering methodology, and cannot be used to establish quantitative metrics of experience. Focus groups are not controlled environments, though the moderator does help participants feel comfortable sharing ideas with each other. More importantly, focus groups do not give a sense of frequency of behaviors or intensity of beliefs.

ORGANIZING THE TEAM

A focus group research team should include individuals who can support the effective coordination of logistics, recruitment of participants, technology and data management, data analysis, and dissemination and otherwise following up on findings. In other words, the team should comprise enough individuals for the effort to be useful, to be empowered, and to contribute to key improvements. For independent school settings, this may require the involvement of administrators, research office personnel, information technology personnel, neutral third parties, and/or representatives of impacted stakeholder groups (e.g., teachers, students, parents).

The key participant-facing team members are the facilitator and note-taker. These two individuals are responsible for building group rapport, supporting the conversation, and recording the information from the group. These two team members should be neutral parties from the perspective of all participants, thus it may be important to choose these members from outside the organization. These needs apply to anyone who will be in the room with the participants during discussions, and may also apply to anyone known to be involved in soliciting participation or analyzing focus group data. It is very important that focus group participants feel comfortable being candid.

DEFINING SCOPE AND PURPOSE

Once a research team is organized, the most important task is to define the purpose of the focus group and establish key parameters for moderating and analyzing the conversations. What are the major research questions being asked, and why? What experiences can be understood and improved as a result of this approach, and who will be affected? Such consideration may require the team to review alternative research methodologies to confirm that a focus group approach is the most desirable, feasible, and empirically sound option.

Effective focus groups are moderated with a discussion guide that helps the facilitator move participants' open-ended discussion toward answering a few critical questions. In preparation for the focus group(s), the research team should craft a succinct but flexible discussion guide. The discussion guide presents the major topical questions in a logical order, phrased in ways that are appropriate for and sensitive to the selected participants. It also offers the facilitator additional prompts in case the set questions do not inspire participants in a given group.

To illustrate the design process, we present an example focus group study:

Hanover Research is conducting focus groups in select areas to explore how parents and guardians who live in affluent neighborhoods perceive the schools in these neighborhoods, and to better understand how parents and guardians select schools for their children. These groups will inform the school's marketing and enrollment management strategy, with the ultimate goal of attracting greater numbers of affluent families. Given these general methodological goals, Hanover defines the major research questions driving these focus groups as:

- What factors drive the enrollment decisions of affluent families?
- How can an independent school become a more attractive option for affluent families?
- How do affluent families determine the relative value of public versus independent school options; what factors could increase the perceived value of independent schools?

Figure 1: Sample Discussion Guide

GENERAL QUESTION AND RECOMMENDED TIME LIMIT	FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS	CONTEXT AND RELEVANT SUB-TOPICS OF NOTE
When you consider the schooling options available to your family, <u>what factors influence your decision?</u> (15 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How did you decide where to enroll your child(ren)? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What factors were most influential? ■ How do independent or private schools compare to public schools? ■ In what ways did your decision-making process vary between elementary, middle, and high school selections? ■ What sources do/did you turn to for information? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ These non-intrusive questions will serve as basic, introductory prompts to initiate discussion. They will also gauge familiarity to inform later questions in the session.
<i>The following sections will be presented in an order that flows naturally based on responses.</i>		
Next, I'd like to learn more the kinds of <u>academic</u> experiences you value for your child(ren). (15 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ When thinking about academics, what opportunities were most appealing during your school search? ■ What was most appealing about the school that you ultimately chose? ■ How could an independent school differentiate its academic offerings from the schools you considered? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Quality of teaching and/or curriculum, character and leadership development, small class sizes, innovative instruction, use of technology, college counseling and placement
Next, I'd like to learn more about the kinds of <u>student life</u> opportunities you value for your child(ren). (15 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ When thinking about student life, what kinds of things did you look for? ■ Were any campus features particularly appealing to you? ■ What aspects of student life were most appealing about the school that you ultimately chose? ■ How could an independent school differentiate its student life offerings from the schools you considered? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Extracurricular activities, arts, dress code/uniform requirement, campus climate
(Other factors) (10 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ In your experience, what does independent school tuition typically cost? ■ How influential is school transportation and travel time? ■ What are other ways that an independent school differentiate the experience it provides? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ [Note for facilitator only: the client's tuition is lower than many of their competitors] ■ Safety, special services, prestige, culture, school leadership

The research team should also consider the scope and use of analysis, which informs key elements such as the discussion guide, participant selection, and note-taking. For example, a focus group is an ideal place to examine experience differentials according to any of a variety of distinctions, such as role (e.g., teacher or parent), tenure (e.g., students new to the school), or demographics (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, SES, unique attributes). But one

single focus group session cannot address all these perspectives. The team must decide which, if any, are important, and codify this so the facilitator and note-taker will be aware of priorities during the sessions they moderate.

Once an initial discussion guide and analysis plan are established, the research team should complete a test-run of the group to identify potential problems with the order and phrasing of questions, additional or alternative questions that can better address the full scope and intent of the research project, and/or materials that should be available to participants to help support the conversation. For example, a focus group with students often works best when there is a visual prompt such as a PowerPoint, handout, or other manipulative. Similarly, a focus group discussing a mission statement or strategic plan might benefit from having copies of those documents available to participants during or in advance of the conversation.

SELECTING AND PREPARING PARTICIPANTS

Experts recommend a minimum focus group size of about six participants, and a maximum focus group size of about 12 participants. Considerations for group size include the space available (e.g., can the room fit 14 people?), the comfort of the facilitator, and even the goals of the research project. For example, with many voices, a larger group may not be able to address multiple questions.

Focus group participants should not be a random sample of the population; rather, they should be purposefully recruited based on the objectives of the study. That is, which groups are most important to speak with - teachers, parents, students. Specific strategies for participant selection include nomination, using an existing group, a role or job title cohort, or asking for volunteers.

Focus groups work best when participants in a given session can relate to each other. For this reason, it is also considered acceptable to exclude certain individuals from a group when their personality or history suggests a likelihood to obstruct the flow of the discussion or disrupt discussion.

Across all groups in a given research initiative, the focus groups should nonetheless strive for equal and adequate representation of all perspectives defined in the research objective. This may require modifying the discussion guide or implementation to account for the unique needs of certain populations. For example, a gender-specific focus group may be best led by a representative of that same gender group. Or a focus group seeking the perspectives of non-English speakers should be led by a representative of that language group.

Finally, depending on the laws and protections governing the research effort, it may be important for the focus group team to have each participant review and sign a consent form in accordance with approval from a Human Subjects Committee. This can be a time-consuming process accounted for in the timeline planning stages, but serves to ensure that

the identities of participants are protected. Remember, it is imperative that participants in a focus group feel completely comfortable sharing their honest opinions and experiences.

When contacting prospective participants, Campbell Hall should inform them of the following items:

- **The purpose of the focus group.** Research suggests that it is important that the purpose is clearly communicated in order to encourage participation from engaged, informed stakeholders¹²
- **Their participation is voluntary.** Participants should be aware that, while their perspectives would be appreciated, they are *not required to participate in the study*. Both national and international law, as well as codes of conduct of scientific communities protect human research subjects' exercise of free will in deciding whether to participate in a research activity.
- **Sessions will include light refreshments (or a meal).**
- **The amount of monetary incentives (if relevant).**
- **The time commitment required to participate in the focus group (approximately 90 minutes)**
- **The level of confidentiality agreed upon for the focus group (see below)**

LOGISTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

FINDING THE RIGHT ROOM

The focus group room should be a private, neutral space that can accommodate all participants and facilitators comfortably. All participants should be able to access the room easily, which may require the school to make accommodations such as transportation or excusal from regular duties. The room should not be the moderator's office, the office of an official who is present, or the office/room of any participant. This minimizes the impact of latent power relationships (e.g., a dissatisfied teacher in the headmaster's office).

At a minimum, the space must be climate-controlled and comfortably accommodate all invited participants and the focus group team. It should also accommodate any equipment or materials that people might bring (e.g., winter coats, backpacks, etc.). It should be able to accommodate the required technology, including access to high-speed internet connected via Ethernet if web access is required, as well as the appropriate working equipment described later.

¹² "Helpful Hints for Conducting a Focus Group," Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, Central Connecticut State University, p. 1.
http://web.ccsu.edu/uploaded/departments/administrativedepartments/institutional_research_and_assessment/assessment/resources/focusgroupshints.pdf

It may also be beneficial to have a shared writing space, such as a blackboard, whiteboard, or paper, with the needed writing instruments (chalk, dry-erase marker, pens/pencils, etc.). These tools are helpful for the facilitator to document ideas that he/she would like to return to and/or help participants recall what others have said.

To summarize, an ideal focus group space is neutral, free of interruptions, comfortable, accessible, and private.

PRIMING ATTENDANCE

Participation in the focus group can be encouraged by reducing the burden on participants' schedules through various strategies and incentives. Ideally, the focus group team will find a time that matches everyone's schedule. One easy way to do this is to use an existing, regular meeting time that the group uses for other purposes – and asking them if it would be okay to do so. A good alternative might be to set aside time during the regular school day and provide support so that all participants (students, faculty, and staff) are officially excused from normal duty. In planning a focus group, the research team should consider various elements of the shared schedule, such as examination periods, vacation and illness trends (e.g., don't plan a focus group during peak flu season, or around the winter holiday), and other common experiences (e.g., sports schedules, parent-teacher night).

Barriers to attendance can include:

- "I'm not available outside of work hours."
- "The timing/location complicate my schedule – e.g., child care, meal time, family time, volunteering, hobbies/groups (like church/choir)."
- "The site is not familiar to me, or is not a public setting – this makes me uncomfortable."
- "Transportation to the site is outside of normal expectations (e.g., not at my school, not at a known/school site, I don't usually have to drive to work)."
- "The language of the focus group is not my first/native language."

SAMPLE ACTION ITEMS

- Review and finalize this document. Specifically, establish clear objectives for the focus groups, including appropriate guiding questions for the session facilitators to use to address each objective and analytical methods and objectives.
- Recruit three-person facilitation team to fill the roles of moderator, note-taker, and technical support with the comfort and confidentiality of focus group participants in mind.
- Recruit focus group participants based on research-based recommendations for composition within school resource constraints and context.
- Send invitation emails as soon as possible to prospective focus group participants; invite 7 – 13 stakeholders for each of the 17 focus groups to ensure adequate participation (see Figure 1 for desired composition); participants should be made aware of confidentiality matters *prior to* focus groups.
- Send reminder email two days prior to focus groups to ensure participation.
- Confirm timing for all four focus groups; scheduling should account for set-up time (15 minutes), facilitation (90 minutes), debriefing (15 minutes), and transit
- Confirm site locations for each focus group; focus group rooms should be quiet, secluded, and contain a circular table and/or chair arrangement.
- Confirm refreshments and monetary incentives for each focus group. If focus groups are held during a meal time, Brearley should provide a meal. If focus groups are held outside of work hours, Brearley should compensate employees accordingly.
- Design a focus group protocol. Specifically, establish clear objectives for the focus groups, including appropriate guiding questions for the session facilitators to use to address each objective and analytical methods and objectives.
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TECHNOLOGY CHECK

The room should offer the full range of technology options required to connect with participants and moderators, as well as to record the session for note-taking purposes. Depending on the plan for facilitation, this might include video equipment, audio equipment, and/or telephone/conferencing equipment, as well as the personnel to ensure they are in working condition and used properly. The research team should prepare and test the room and all equipment in advance, especially if they are working with a third party to moderate the sessions.

CONDUCTING THE FOCUS GROUP

PREPARATION

Prior to the focus group session, the moderator should review all planning materials to understand the context in which s/he will work with participants. This includes:

- Topic guide/focus group guide
- Location setup (e.g., technology, arrangement of seats, etc.)
- Focus group research team (e.g., who has note-taker responsibilities, recording responsibilities, etc.)
- Participant information (e.g., what is the uniting characteristic, what do we know distinguishes individuals, what are the potential challenges of building a group dynamic, etc.)

To help the note-taker protect participant identities, name tents should identify important but neutral characteristics that will be used for analysis, such as role, grade level, subject area, etc.

PHASES OF MODERATION

Each focus group begins with an introduction, builds a conversation around key questions outlined in the discussion guide, and concludes with a summary of ideas and appreciation for the participants' time and contributions. Participants should be informed of the agenda and structure of the conversation during introductions, and may be given a handout at the beginning of the meeting that outlines these points as well as the rules for discussion.

BUILDING RAPPORT

The opening conversation is used to build group rapport. Basic and neutral questions help participants feel comfortable sharing experiences and ideas, before being asked to share more intimate or personal information with the group. These opening questions also create a shared foundation for moving the conversation toward those more sensitive topics. Appendix A provides a sample of a protocol that presents ground rules and builds rapport.

The core of the conversation serves to generate and evaluate ideas, opinions, beliefs, and experiences. Participants lead. The moderator serves only to facilitate participation on equal and comfortable terms for all involved, and to help move the conversation through particularly challenging, complex, or awkwardly articulated concepts. Questions the moderator offers serve as prompts rather than a checklist of tasks to accomplish by the end of the conversation. The participants' ideas and what they value *are* important.

The closing moments of the focus group offer an opportunity to assure participants that they were heard and understood. First, the moderator summarizes key ideas that were covered in

the conversation; participants have an opportunity to adjust the moderator's understanding, and to add elements of importance that there was not time to cover. Second, the moderator thanks the participants for their time and participation; if there is a clear plan for follow-up, this is noted along with points of contact if participants have concerns about what was brought up.

PROBES AND PROBLEM-SOLVING

The focus group methodology is prone to being dominated or sidetracked by a few individuals.¹³ Before focus group sessions begin, the moderator will observe participant "small talk" to determine which participants may be less inclined to discuss. The moderator can position herself/himself closer to these individuals in order to keep them engaged.¹⁴

In addition to the primary questions outlined in the protocol, the moderator should frequently employ the following probes to questions:¹⁵

- "Can you talk about that more?"
- "Help me understand what you mean"
- "Can you give me an example?"
- Summarize long, complex or ambiguous comments to demonstrate active listening and to clarify the comment for everyone in the group

Facilitators must have a toolkit of practices that will support quick and effective building of rapport and group dynamic. These can be phrases to use, or body language to employ, or other strategies for managing the conversation. Facilitators must be able to identify and use the variety of personalities presented to them in the session in ways that support the group and the research efforts without allying with either. Some example personalities include self-appointed experts, the dominator, the rambler, the shy participant, and the participant who talks very quietly.

One source emphasizes, "Because the moderator holds a position of authority and perceived influence, s/he must remain neutral, refraining from nodding/raising eyebrows, agreeing/disagreeing, or praising/denigrating any comment made."¹⁶ The facilitator does not get involved in the conversation. S/he does not agree or disagree with statements, express anything other than potentially mild confusion. S/he seeks only to observe. However, it is within the moderator's role to help provide structure to the conversation as it unfolds. Specifically, "it is good moderator practice to paraphrase and summarize long, complex, or ambiguous comments" in order to pause, reset, and transition the conversation. Additionally, as a last resort, a facilitator might ask an individual to leave if s/he is unwilling to be a part of

¹³ "Data Collection Methods for Program Evaluation: Focus Groups," Op. cit.

¹⁴ Nagle, B. and Williams, N., Op. cit., p. 8.

¹⁵ Krueger, R. A., Op. cit.

¹⁶ Eliot & Assoc. 2005. Op. cit.

the group after multiple efforts to include that person appropriately (e.g., pausing a dominator to hear other ideas).

WRAP-UP QUESTIONS

Once the facilitator has guided participants through the primary and probing questions, participants should be able to share any final thoughts. Important to note, this should still be a semi-structured conversation. For example, one facilitator used the following questions to close a focus group with teachers:

- “Of all the things we discussed, what to you is the most important?”
- “Have we missed anything that you believe is important to understanding how an independent school could attract more families like yours?”

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Beyond verbal interjections, the moderator may employ the following non-verbal communication strategies to maintain well-balanced participant engagement:¹⁷

- If someone has something to say, the moderator will acknowledge them with a hand signal to let him/her know that you will give them an opportunity to contribute
- If someone interrupts when someone else is speaking, the moderator will signal them to wait and that they will be given an opportunity to speak
- Moderator will establish eye contact with those that are speaking but also with those that are not participating to encourage their engagement in the conversation

DATA GATHERING PRACTICES

Facilitators must be able to listen actively and guide the conversation while recording robust notes on the participation of individuals as well as the progress of the group.¹⁸

Above all, data from focus groups must balance three elements:

- Attention to the research goals and established evaluation methods
- Attention to the conversation topics, intensity, and flow
- Care for the confidentiality of participation
- Direct quotations
- Annotated participant identity (i.e., not the name, but placard information)

To summarize, the key phases of moderation are introduction, core conversation, and conclusion. The moderator helps build rapport in the introduction, observes and facilitates

¹⁷ Verbatim from: Nagle, B. and Williams, N., Op. cit., p. 7.

¹⁸ Krueger, R.A. “Designing and Conducting Focus Group Interviews.” October 2002.
<http://www.eiu.edu/~iheec/Krueger-FocusGroupInterviews.pdf>

the core conversation, and reports key findings to the group at its conclusion. The moderator also thanks participants for their time and effort.

COMPILING AND ANALYZING FOCUS GROUP DATA

This section describes how focus group data can be used and analyzed. It is important for the facilitator and note-taker to engage in a 10 to 15-minute debriefing session. During this session, the facilitator and note-taker should:

- Note any quotes or behaviors that stood out during the session.
- Ensure that the note-taker has recorded the number of people who participated and draft a brief summary of the focus group experience. For example, it is important to note if everyone ultimately participated or if anyone was aggressive in conversation.¹⁹

The moderator should then read through the note-taker's transcripts and notes to begin identifying the essential information that will address the research questions. The researcher should also assign each participant an ID number to remove identifying information about each participant. Typically, a researcher will use Microsoft Word tracked changes or the highlighting feature in Word to document this information.

The researcher should then follow the steps outlined below:²⁰

- **Step 1:** Remove nonessential text from the transcripts.
- **Step 2:** Create an Excel file that has a tab for each research question. Each tab should contain three columns: one for the participant ID, one for the response data, and one for the coding.
- **Step 3:** Place the text that is relevant to each research question in the Excel file. Each row should have text from a single participant.
- **Step 4:** Once all of the comments have been entered, begin coding the data in each tab. Once the codes have been assigned, the researcher should assign a letter or number to each code.
- **Step 5:** Enter the number or letter for each category next to each response.
- **Step 6:** Using the Excel Sort function, review the responses related to each number or letter category. At this point, the researcher should consider whether there is overlap within the categories and begin to collapse categories to identify themes.
- **Step 7:** Group categories according to themes.
- **Step 8:** Begin writing summary paragraphs to describe the themes that were identified for each research question. It is important to include direct quotes from the responses to support the summaries.

¹⁹ "Managing Focus Groups." WBI Evaluation Group. Op. cit.

²⁰ "Managing Focus Groups." WBI Evaluation Group. Op. cit.

APPENDIX A: INTRODUCTION TO FOCUS GROUPS

INTRODUCTION (10 – 15 MINUTES)

The moderator should take care to include the following components in the focus group introduction:²¹

- **Welcome and Thank You:** The moderator will offer a general welcome to participants and thank them for their time and participation
- **Overview of Topic:** Participants should be reminded of the main goals of the focus group at the beginning of the session. Specifically, the moderator should provide an introduction such as the following:²²
 - “Good morning and welcome. Thanks for taking the time to join our discussion about how parents and guardians perceive the schools in their neighborhood. My name is [moderator name], and I will serve as the moderator for today’s focus group. Assisting me is [technician and note-taker names]. We are ... [*describe their relation to the study*]. The purpose of today’s discussion is to learn from you about your experience with selecting schools for your children. We are very excited to have your input and welcome you to share your honest and open thoughts with us.”
- **Incentive:** “Should you choose to stay until the end of the group, we will we will send you a \$100 gift code via email, as promised.”
- **Establishment of Ground Rules:** The moderator should lay out the following simple ground rules in order to establish a positive, collaborative dynamic:
 - *Encourage Participation:* “we want participants to do the talking, not the moderator. Therefore, we want everyone to participate and we may call upon you if we haven’t heard from you in a while.”
 - *Create ‘safe space’:* “There are no right/wrong answers to these questions. You should feel free to express your opinion and to disagree with any point raised by a fellow participant.”
 - *Reiteration of confidentiality; participants should be reminded that their answers will be reported anonymously:* “I want to briefly discuss your confidentiality in this focus group. We are recording the session today to ensure that we do not miss any of your comments. [Note-taker] will also be taking notes on your comments. We have name tents here in front of us today, but **no names** will be included in any reports. Your responses will be reported anonymously, although we may use a generic identifier such as ‘parent #1’ when referencing specific quotes in the report. Please do not hesitate to reach out to me via email if you have any questions about your confidentiality.”

²¹ Ibid.

²² Rennekamp, R. and Nall, M., “Using Focus Groups in Program Development and Evaluation,” University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension, p. 5. <http://www2.ca.uky.edu/AgPSD/Focus.pdf>

- **Participant introductions:** The moderator will ask each participant to introduce herself/himself. The moderator will randomly point to someone to start in order to non-verbally indicate that future responses will not be solicited in sequence.²³ The moderator will also ask participants to provide identifying information unique to their stakeholder group. Specifically, the moderator will request the following:
 - *Parents:* “Please also provide the grade level of your eldest child as well as their school”

²³ Nagle, B. and Williams, N., Op. cit., p. 12.

APPENDIX B: CHECKLIST FOR PLANNING FOCUS GROUPS

- Confirm research questions can be addressed by focus group methodology
- Identify the stakeholders who need to participate
- Determine timing and location for focus groups
 - Remember to offer different times of day and locations for parent groups
- Invite focus group participants 4 to 6 weeks in advance. Remember to include:
 - Purpose of focus group and how data will be used
 - Note about confidentiality
 - Time commitment required
 - Location
 - Whether you will have an interpreter
- Create a discussion guide
 - Include introduction and rapport building questions
 - Craft questions that will address the research questions
 - Anticipate challenges and draft probing questions
- Create note sheet that aligns with discussion guide for note taker
- Create PowerPoint slides to guide discussion (if necessary)
- Gather materials for focus group participants
 - Name tents or tags
 - Small note pads
 - Pens
- Confirm focus group location has technology set up
- Send reminder to focus group participants a few days in advance of focus groups
- Bring water and/or snacks for participants

APPENDIX C: COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION METHODS

Figure C.1: Comparative Discussion Methods

METHOD	DESCRIPTION	NOTES
SWOT	Collective identification and discussion of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats by decision-makers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Structured group conversation ✓ Leads to specific solutions or proposals ✓ Topics are dictated by leadership
DACUM	Collective analysis of a key target (e.g., curriculum, role) by high-performing representatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Leads to competency profile of the target ✓ Used for goal-setting and planning purposes ✓ Informs (and informed by) an understanding of worker duties and expectations
Meeting	A structured conversation with impacted stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Objective-based, structured conversation ✓ Produces action items and sets policies/expectations ✓ Values what is most important to the organization
Focus Group	An exploratory series of open conversations that illuminate needs and ideas among a representative sample of stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Loosely structured group conversation ✓ Produces many ideas through open discussion ✓ Values what is most important to stakeholders × Does not lead to specific solutions or proposals

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