# CHAPTER 9:  USING FOCUS GROUPS

> *Focus groups provide an excellent opportunity to listen to the voices of students, explore issues in depth, and obtain insights that might not occur without the discussion they provide.*
> (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p.196)

## Topics Presented in Chapter 9

◊   Definition of focus group
◊   Appropriate use of focus groups
◊   Advantages and disadvantages of focus groups
◊   Planning and conducting focus groups
◊   Analyzing focus group data

## Definition of Focus Group

***Focus groups are discussions*** in which the moderator supplies the topics and monitors the discussion. The purpose is to gather information about a specific or focused topic in a group environment, allowing for discussion and interaction by the participants. Focus groups can be used as the sole source of data or as a complement to another research method such as a survey.

## Appropriate Use of Focus Groups

Focus groups should be used to:

•   Examine attitudes or opinions and why they are held.
•   Identify strengths and weaknesses of programs.
•   Interpret results from other assessment projects.
•   Provide information for designing surveys.

Focus groups should not be used:

•   For assessment that requires statistical projections or statistically representative data.
•   For subjects that are emotionally charged.
•   When participants are not comfortable with each other.

# Advantages and Disadvantages of Focus Groups

## Advantages

- Focus groups can be relatively low cost and provide quick results. The actual time and cost for planning, conducting, and analyzing data may be relatively small when compared to alternatives such as survey projects and individual interviews.

- Focus groups are a flexible assessment tool. Interactions between the moderator and participants allow the moderator to probe issues in depth, address new issues as they arise, and to ask participants to elaborate on their responses.

- Participants may be more comfortable talking in a group than in an individual interview. Interactions can generate more discussion and, therefore, more information.

- The data is in the respondents' own words. It is easily understood and will provide insights into how respondents think about the topic.

## Disadvantages

- Groups can be difficult to assemble.

- The group setting can influence the responses of individuals, which is problematic when a dominant member affects the outcomes.

- The small numbers in focus groups can limit the extent to which the results can and should be generalized.

- The quality and quantity of focus group data is dependent on the ability of the moderator, making it essential that the moderator is carefully trained and skillful.

- The qualitative nature of focus group data can make it more difficult to summarize and interpret than more quantitative types.

# Planning and Conducting Focus Groups

## Planning Focus Group Questions

Questions should be concrete, specific, focused, simple, and open-ended, going from the more general to the more specific. They can also be ordered by their importance to the research project. Many researchers suggest using questions such as *what prompted you*, *what influenced you*, or *what features* in place of *why*.

Exercises can be used in place of questions to ensure that all focus group members have an opportunity to participate. Group members can be asked to write a word or phrase on an index card and then share their responses, to create lists or brainstorm ideas, to rate aspects of a program and then explain what led them to give that particular rating. Sentence completion exercises are also used to generate participation (e.g., *What I liked best about this program was…*). The openness of the focus group format allows for a multitude of activities that can guide or encourage discussion.

**Selecting a Good Focus Group Leader, someone who…**

- Understands the  group process

- Is…
    - Aware
    - Curious
    - Diplomatic
    - Empathetic
    - Flexible
    - Friendly with a sense of humor
    - Good communicator
    - Good listener
    - Interested in people
    - Open to new ideas
    - Quick learner

- Has…
    - An excellent memory
    - Control over personal reactions
    - Good time management

**Other Planning Issues**

Researchers differ on the ideal *size of a focus group*, but most consist of 8 to 15 participants. Although the project objective will determine who is included in the focus group, the focus group participants should be comfortable talking to each other. A relatively homogenous group is useful, not only for the openness of participants, but also to allow for an easier interpretation of the outcomes.

Researchers must decide if *incentives and rewards* will be used in recruiting participants. Incentives can be anything that draws or encourages participation. (Extra-credit, free food, or monetary rewards will probably appeal to students.) Researchers must ensure that they find participants who will get involved in the discussion, whether these or other means are used to encourage involvement.

Selecting an appropriate *location* where the focus group can meet is a very important planning decision. The room and seating arrangements should be comfortable for everyone involved and free from distractions such as noise or interruptions.

*Recording* **or** *note taking* decisions should be made in advance. Audio or video recordings can be used to document the group process, but they have the potential for stifling openness. Note taking might be the only form of record keeping appropriate in these circumstances. Written notes are also useful as a backup for equipment failure.

## Conducting a Focus Group

### Introduction

The moderator begins the focus group with a ***short*** *introduction*, which includes:

- A brief welcome.
- An overview of the topic.
- Guidelines or ground rules.
- An opening question.

The ***welcome*** includes a thank you for participating and an introduction of the moderator(s). The ***overview*** is usually short and simple, explaining what the topic is and why the participants were chosen. ***Guidelines*** are used to lay ground rules such as speaking one at a time or using first names only. They also function to explain recording devices, confidentiality, and the role of the moderator. The ***opening question*** should serve as an ice-breaker that will give each participant an opportunity to speak.

### Moderating

***Listening*** *i*s important to moderating a focus group. The moderator should make a conscious effort to actively listen, focus on listening rather than talking, make eye contact with each participant as they speak, and be familiar with the questions and objectives of the project. Good ***time management*** is crucial. The moderator must weigh the length of discussion needed for each question with the time limits of the focus group. Finally, the moderator must ***probe for further information*** by observing nonverbal clues, drawing out information, and following up on ambiguous statements.

### Facility Concerns

Facility problems usually involve ***distractions* or *recording equipment failure*** which can be prevented with a little planning. Examining a room ahead of time will alert a moderator to potential problems. Precautions such as closing doors or windows may be all that is needed to eliminate noise and other distractions. Sometimes it is necessary to select a different location, which is easier to do in advance than at the time of the focus group meeting. A moderator should always have a back-up plan for equipment failure, whether it is the use of a back-up tape recorder or skilled note taker.

### Participant Concerns

The tone of the focus group can be overly influenced by a ***dominant group member***. This might be an expert or just someone who likes to talk. A skillful moderator will be able to draw out less vocal members by asking if they agree or disagree and soliciting their opinions. ***Quiet* or *shy group members*** can be encouraged by using eye contact, calling on them by name, and asking follow-up questions to generate useful responses from them.

## Analyzing Focus Group Data

Focus group data require qualitative analysis techniques. Therefore, the most important part of analyzing focus group data is to have a good understanding of the notes taken. First, summarize key ideas in the notes. Find the big ideas by examining the participants' choice of words, considering group context, and looking for consistency among groups and group members. Categories and themes should develop from the language of the notes.