

TOPIC: Focus Group Based Projects

TAGS: Research, Non lab projects, Science Communication, Focus groups

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Focus groups based projects allow a deeper understanding of a research question than what can usually be gained through questionnaires alone, and work well in combination with questionnaires. Focus groups are mediated by the interviewer, who will ask a series of predetermined questions around the chosen topic. Participants are given time to answer the questions and also (and often interestingly) time to discuss with each other their answers and opinions on the topic(s). Focus groups are best recorded and then transcribed at a later date, this allows the interviewer to focus on the interviewees and not be bias in their note taking.

WHAT TO DO FIRST

The first and most important element is to plan the focus group and obtain the appropriate ethics approval. As part of the ethics you will need to provide the focus group questions, participant information and recruitment details. Only after you have ethics in place can you start recruiting individuals to your focus group. As gaining ethics approval takes time, I would recommend undertaking research which does not ask emotive questions, overly personal questions or for details that could identify them or others. This, along with anonymising the responses of the focus group should make obtaining ethics more straightforward.

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

A typical focus group will last about one hour, and I would recommend no more that 6-8 questions in that time. When writing your questions think about:

- i) the flow of the conversation
- ii) whether you want to ask quite focussed or more open questions
- iii) ensure your questions are not biased or leading participants to answer questions in a particular way.

The quality of the questions asked will determine the quality of the data you get from the project!

RECRUITING TO THE FOCUS GROUPS

The biggest issue with recruitment to focus group is the bias in those who volunteer to take part. A targeted approach can help with this but needs to be included in your ethics. If you are looking to run several group with different types of students think carefully. Stratifying participants based on course, for example, is straight forward, but if you would like specific groups based on different ethnicities, for example, you'll need to be careful how you put the groups together and this will need to be addressed in your ethics.

RUNNING THE FOCUS GROUPS

Typically focus groups would be 4-10 participants, but in the current climate with focus groups needing to be undertaken via video call I would recommend having a lower number of participants (3-5) per group. During the focus group the interviewer should remain objective and work through the list of questions. They'll need to make sure all the participants have the opportunity to speak, facilitate additional discussions and be confident enough to shut down conversions that stray too far from the research theme or are becoming personal / confrontational / offense (this is essential to compile with ethical practices).

WHAT TO DO NEXT

After the focus group you'll have audio recording of the conversation(s). You could get your student to transcribe this into Word or use an online service; we have used White Transcription Services in the past (<https://white-transcriptions.co.uk>). If you are going to use a transcription service, make sure it is in your ethics. Once the focus group data is in Word, we would then undertake a thematic analysis.

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