

Focus Groups

Overview

A focus group is an organised discussion with a group of individuals to understand their views and experiences of a project, activity or a topic. Focus groups can be used as a substitute for interviews, to understand experiences, learning, expectations and impacts of being involved in a project.

Focus groups should be held at a convenient time and location for all those invited, and should, ideally, be recorded and transcribed.

Why use it?

Focus groups can be a means of capturing more qualitative information than a questionnaire will provide (i.e. how and why things happened or people felt or acted the way they did) and will take less time than administering several individual interviews. However, because focus groups are not as structured as interviews, you may not get the same level of detail from a focus group response as you would from undertaking several interviews.

Specifically, for evaluating public engagement projects and/or activities, focus groups can be used to understand:

- the project process (the management, the partnership, the delivery);
- stakeholders' role and level of involvement in the project;
- expectations and aims of being involved in the project;
- feedback on the project, particularly feelings about the project outcomes and outputs;
- what changes, if any, have taken place;
- potential impact of the project on individuals;
- what worked well and what didn't work;
- how the project could have been improved;
- understandings of certain concepts or issues (i.e. science, education, public engagement).

Focus groups are useful to obtain several perspectives about a project, activity or a topic. Unlike one-to-one interviews people can build upon one another's responses and come up with ideas they may not have thought of on their own. They are particularly beneficial for bringing together a range of people or stakeholders (i.e. staff, students, local authority, community, local businesses).

Depending on how the session is structured a focus group can provide a good opportunity to reach a consensus on certain topics or issues (i.e. for instance a group could be asked to rank or agree on priorities for the direction of or next steps for a project).

Instructions for use

There are some general rules for using focus groups as a technique for evaluation:

- The size of the group matters - focus groups work best with 6-8 people.

- Ensure there is a set of ground rules for the focus group, covering what behaviour is acceptable within the session, make sure these are read out at the start to all participants (or stuck on the wall so you can refer to it if needed). The ground rules should be agreed by all participants at the start. You could even ask the participants to suggest some rules.
- Ensure that the seating is in a circle so that people can see each other and everyone feels involved. If some individuals are physically marginalised they may not contribute.
- The role of the focus group facilitator/moderator is very important. Leadership and interpersonal skills are required to moderate the group and the conversation. They should encourage discussion around particular topics or subjects. It is likely that they will have to step in at certain points to ensure that the session stays on track. Ideally use someone who is experienced in this area.
- The focus group should, if possible, be recorded and transcribed.

Who to use it with

Focus groups can be used with established groups (such as the project team) or with a group assembled specially to be a focus group (such as those involved in or affected by a project).

When to use it

It is probably best to use focus groups before and after the public engagement activity.

Limitations

- Focus groups require good mediation. The size and composition of the group are important considerations. Beware of dominating personalities who may restrict others from talking. Furthermore, look out for shy individuals who may feel intimidated by the situation and require encouragement.
- As it is an open-ended process, you may not get the precise answers that you would expect from a questionnaire or interview.
- Problems may arise when attempting to identify the individual view from the group view.
- Focus groups can be difficult to assemble; try to approach a pre-existing group. As well as saving time, group members will be comfortable with each other and perhaps more open and honest, than a group of strangers would be with each other.
- In some circumstances, focus groups are perceived by groups as an opportunity to complain about issues relevant to them, which soon becomes unconstructive. Beyond good mediation, one method to curtail this is to give the group the first 5-10 minutes to put their complaints across. Having been given the group this opportunity, they may be more willing to move forward into the discussion.

Considerations

Assure the focus group participants that their responses will be confidential, good practice is to ask participants to sign a consent form.

If you are collating any personal or sensitive information, you may need to assure respondents that their responses will be kept confidential. You may also need to declare the collection and storage of any personal data (i.e. information about a living person by which that person can be identified), under the Data Protection Act. More information on this matter can be obtained from your department's data protection officer and <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/efd/recordsoffice/data-protection/>

Timing

The time needed to undertake focus groups depends upon the questions you ask and who you are talking to. In general, you should allow at least an hour to undertake the focus group, bearing in mind that the timing of a focus group can always run over or under. Also, do not forget to build in time to write up notes and observations from the focus group.

Link with other methodologies

Focus groups can be useful to provide further qualitative information for a project after a questionnaire has been administered. Also, the information gathered on a 'walk and talk' (i.e. photographs) can be used to stimulate discussion in a focus group.

Further Reading

If you are interested in finding out more, below are some examples covering both background and application of the method:

Social Research Update 'Focus Groups': <http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU19.html>
Morgan, D.L. (1997) Focus groups as qualitative research. London: Sage.
Bryman, A. (2004) Social Research Methods, Oxford University Press: Oxford
Denzin, N. K. and Lincoln, Y. S. (1994) Handbook of Qualitative Research, Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA

Example 01

The template below is a discussion guide developed for a focus group to evaluate Food Junctions Festival. Food Junctions was a collaborative, creative festival held in April-May 2010 in Kings Cross, organised by UCL students and staff, funded by the UCL Public Engagement Unit. The discussion guide was designed to be used pre-festival with the Food Junctions project team. The purpose of the focus group is to conduct evaluative research to: generate a comprehensive list of topics surrounding the issues faced by project team concerning Food Junctions pre-festival.

Introduction - Welcome and introduce myself.

Explain the general purpose of the discussion

Explain the presence and purpose of recording equipment

Address the issue of confidentiality. All information collected will be confidential and participants names will not be disclosed neither will any attributions for quotes be made in my final report. I hope this encourages you to speak openly.

Let's begin. I'd like to find out some more about you by going around the room one at a time. Please tell me your first name and the role you have within the project team.

Why did you choose to get involved with this project?

What comes to mind when you think about *Food Junctions*?

Professional Development

What kind of professional skills do you hope to develop from *Food Junctions*?

What kind of knowledge do you think you will take away at the end of *Food Junctions*?

What do you know about public engagement at UCL and what does the term mean to you?

How do you think you will go about creating a successful dialogue with the public audience?

What challenges have come up so far for you?

Shared learning

How do you feel UCL – your peers, lecturers, and advisory committee - have responded to *Food Junctions*?

What is the most interesting or intriguing use of knowledge exchange and shared learning within higher education that you have ever heard about? It doesn't matter whether this is already happening within UCL or not, I just want to know what you find interesting

What changes would you like to see made at UCL with regard to how knowledge exchange and shared learning is managed?

Is there anything else you would like to share?

Example 02

The example below is taken from the evaluation of a public engagement entertainment event which runs every month called Bright Club. Bright Club is a public engagement project organised by the UCL Public Engagement Unit, the project tests a different, new method for HEI public engagement, focused around entertainment. The schedule provided a guide for a focus group undertaken with a sample of the audience (7 audience members) who attended Bright Club.

Bright Club Discussion Group Guide

Introduction

-Aims of focus group: the evaluation of the Bright Club aims to explore stakeholders' experiences and identify key lessons learnt from the project which could be shared more widely. I would like to talk to you about your experience of attending bright club. I'm interested in both positive and negative comments, so would really like you to honestly reflect on your experience.

-Consent form

-Ground rules. These rules can help set the boundaries for decorum (e.g. mobile phones on silent) and for interaction and exchange (e.g. listening to others, no interrupting, speaking up).

Getting involved

Why did you come to bright club?

How did you hear about it?

Have you been involved in other similar activities, project or groups? If so, what?

Description

How would you describe bright club?

Did you enjoy the events? Why? What parts?

Can you name one thing you liked about the bright club and one thing you didn't like?

Did you find them useful?

Was it as expected?

Outcomes: changes that have taken place as result of attending bright club

What did you hope to get out of coming to bright club and what did you actually get out of it?

One of the aims is to raise awareness of science, research and the role of higher education.

In your opinion, how and how much does the project do this?

Did you learn anything new? If yes what, if no why not?

Have they continued to think about the issues raised?

Did you use the information and ideas?

Have they attended any other related events, on the same subject?

Conclusion

Where could you see the project going next? How could it be developed further?

What themes/issues do you feel are important?

Any other comments?