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EBL 101

Research Methods: Focus Groups

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Conducting focus groups is a qualitative research method that allows researchers to collect a large amount of data from a substantial group of people in a relatively short amount of time. Focus groups explore how people perceive, feel about, or view a certain service, product, topic, etc. This method gained popularity in marketing and market research in the last several decades. There is an unverified anecdote that tells of the Ford Focus vehicle being named by an extremely bored focus group! However, focus groups need not be boring, and the use of these groups for research has become more popular in the social sciences and the health sciences (Bell, 2010, p. 165). The data produced is unique as well. Given the "synergistic potentials" of focus groups, they "often produce data that are seldom produced through individual interviewing and observation and that result in especially powerful interpretive insights" (Kamberelis & Dimitriadas, 2005, p. 903). In other words, get people talking and the insights will often go further because of the group dynamic.

Focus groups are more commonly conducted face to face, with participants, researchers, and focus group facilitator all together in one place. However, it is becoming more common for focus groups to be conducted virtually, via real time

chat or video conferencing. Although Beck and Manuel (2008) assert that "library and information science practitioner-researchers have not yet used electronic interviews or virtual focus groups to any significant degree," these methods are less costly in terms of administration and data transcription (p. 94-95). It is conceivable that the benefits will outweigh the challenges of conducting virtual research into the future.

Now, what are the basics of conducting focus groups? The basic structure consists of a group of six to ten participants taking part in an organized but flexible conversation that will last one to two hours. A moderator facilitates the discussion, notes are taken, and the entire conversation is usually recorded for later transcription. The role of the moderator is an important one, and if an expert moderator is not available, training should be explored. The "moderator sets the tone of the session . . . [and] needs to strike a balance between ease and formality that encourages the free flow of information but that also requests that participants take the session seriously" (Beck & Manuel, 2008, p.96).

Of course there are issues that can arise when a group meets for a discussion. Some people tend to dominate group discussion while others rarely speak. It is the moderator's job to make sure that all viewpoints are heard. Beck and Manuel (2008) outline some types of focus group participants that can be challenging in a group discussion: dominant talkers, long-winded participants, the expert, the argumentative type, the shy person. It is important to think ahead of ways to deal with the various personalities one may encounter in a focus group.

Careful consideration should go into populating a focus group. Once the topic is decided, you need to think of who would be the best people to inquire about it. Other things to think about are how many participants in total will the study include? How many groups will be conducted? Should each group contain a varied mix of people or be more homogeneous? Beck and Manuel (2008) point out that "the research problem itself primarily drives the answers to these questions through its purposes and goals" (p. 87).

If you are considering conducting focus group research, there are many resources out there to get you started, including the following books:

Glitz, B. (1998). *Focus groups for libraries and librarians*. New York, NY: Forbes.

Greenbaum, T. L. (2000). *Moderating focus groups: A practical guide for group facilitation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Liamputtong, P. (2011). *Focus group methodology: Principles and practices.* Los Angeles: Sage.

Walden, G. R. (2008). *Focus groups: A selective annotated bibliography.* Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.

Additionally, it's a good idea to review research articles that have used focus groups as a research method:

Carlock, D. M., & Perry, A. M. (2008). Exploring faculty experiences with e-books: A focus group. *Library Hi Tech, 26*(2), 244-254. doi:10.1108/07378830810880342

Courtois, M. P., & Turtle, E. C. (2008). Using faculty focus groups to launch a scholarly communication program. *OCLC Systems & Services: International Digital Library Perspectives, 24*(3), 160-166. doi:10.1108/10650750810898192

Fagerheim, B. A., & Weingart, S. J. (2005). Using focus groups to assess student needs. *Library Review, 54*(9), 524-530. doi:10.1108/00242530510629542

MacMillan, D., McKee, S., & Sadler, S. (2007). Getting everyone on the same page: A staff focus group study for library web site redesign. *Reference Services Review, 35*(3), 425-433. doi:10.1108/00907320710774292

Waters, M. (1996). A children's focus group discussion in a public library: part one. *Public Library Quarterly, 15*(2), 5-6.

Focus groups can generate quick and plentiful data for a research project. Their benefits include a relatively low cost, highly detailed data, synergistic results from group participation, and flexibility. Some drawbacks of focus groups include problems with dominant personalities, potential scheduling hassles, the possibility of group think (comes from the desire for harmony within a group which is trying to minimize potential conflict), and outcomes that are highly dependent on the moderator (adapted from Beck & Manuel, 2008, p. 79). However, when you want to discover how a group of people perceives a particular service or topic, a focus group can be the way to go. Next time, we will take a look at a method that is related to focus groups – the interview.

References

Beck, S. E., & Manuel, K. (2008). *Practical research methods for librarians and information professionals.* New York, NY: Neal-Schuman.

Bell, J. (2010). *Doing your research project: A guide for first-time researchers in education, health and social sciences*. New York, NY: Open University.

Kamberelis, G., & Dimitriadas, G. (2005). Focus groups: Strategic articulations of pedagogy, politics, and inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*, (3rd ed.) (pp. 887-907). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.