AEC 387

UF UNIVERSITY *of* FLORIDA
IFAS Extension

Using Focus Group Interviews for Planning or Evaluating Extension Programs[1]

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Although focus group interviews were first used in the private sector as a tool for conducting market research, the technique has gained popularity with Extension professionals as a means of designing programs and assessing outcomes (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

This document provides a brief overview of the focus group interview and suggestions for conducting such interviews. After studying this document, you should feel confident in your ability to use focus group interviews.

What Focus Groups Offer: One reason focus groups are used frequently is that the interviews yield rich, qualitative information which can be used to identify what should be done, what worked and what did not, and why. The latter helps identify ways to improve the program. Focus group interviews also facilitate collection of "success stories"--the kind of information that puts a human face on accountability reports. Such information can be effective in communicating to stakeholders how the program has helped Extensions clientele.

Experiences Using Focus Groups: Florida Extension faculty have used focus group interviews with a number of programs:

- High school students in Immokalee, Florida were asked what they learned when they helped to conduct a community needs assessment survey (Israel, Coleman, & Ilvento, 1993).

- Homemakers, key informants, and high school students participated in 13 focus groups in the six U.S. affiliated Pacific Islands to share their concerns on health and quality of life (Davison, Workman, Daida, Novotny, & Ching, 2004).

- Knowledge and awareness of Extension, as well as the reactions to different message stimuli by representative members of the public in Florida, were explored using focus groups. The marketing strategies identified through this study resulted in the creation of the website www.solutionsforyourlife.com . This website serves both as a showcase of all the programs that Extension in Florida has to offer, and as a communication channel between Extension and its clientele (Irani, Ruth, Telg, & Lundy, 2006).

What is a Focus Group?

A focus group is a planned, relaxed, naturalistic dialogue among a small group of people on a specific topic. The advantage of focus groups over one-on-one interviews is twofold. First, information can be obtained more quickly because only one interview must be scheduled for a group, rather than one for each person. More importantly, the group setting allows individuals to use the ideas of others as cues to more fully elicit their own views. A disadvantage of focus groups over one-on-one interviews is that it is not possible to probe the answers of the participants in depth due to time constraints.

There is no minimum or maximum number of focus group sessions recommended, however, many researchers consider that at least two sessions are required for the results to be valid. Each session may be conducted with different participants, or the same people may meet more than once. The complexity of what you want to know and the feasibility of recruiting enough participants, as well as available meeting opportunities, determine the number of sessions that will be required and how many times the same focus group will meet. Some topics may be so delicate that it may be necessary for the group members to meet two or more times before feeling comfortable enough to share their perceptions. However, most topics in Extension are likely to be openly discussed in just one session.

Each focus group is assigned a moderator and an observer. An Extension faculty member or a trained volunteer may serve as either. The moderator's responsibility is to direct the dialogue by using open-ended questions or discussion topics and probing the participants further about their answers. The observer's responsibility is to take notes on the dialogue. The observer also makes notations on the dynamics between participants when taking turns to answer questions, as well as the body language and interactions among group members. It is important to realize that the observer limits his or her participation and should not interfere with the dialogue.

The number of questions required for each session is also variable; there may be as few as one or

as many as six. Finch and Lewis (2003) propose having three closely related questions or discussion topics. Each participant is given a chance to address the first topic, then the second question is open for discussion where participants freely participate, and finally every participant addresses the third topic. These core questions give the participants a chance to express their opinions and allow you to gain insight into how the participants understand and feel about the topic or issue.

Preparing for the Interview

Drafting the Questions

To effectively plan or evaluate your program, you will need to focus your questions around the clients needs or purpose of the program, respectively. Questions should be worded carefully and follow a logical sequence, flowing from topic to topic.

The following is a list of some of the questions and probes used by the focus groups in the exemplary studies. Probes are follow-up questions that the moderator asks to get clarification or more complete details from a participant:

- Have your views on what people can do to solve problems in Immokalee changed? If so, how?

- Do you think that you are more likely or less likely to get involved in the community after you graduate, given your experience in this project? Why?

- What kinds of things do you think you'll do, if any, for the community?

  (Israel et al., 1993)

- What is health to you? (PROBES: How do you recognize it?... What does it look like? How does it feel?)

- What is collaboration to you? (PROBE: How do you recognize it?)

- What are the key health problems in our community? (PROBE: What are the main reasons that we have this health problem?)

(Davison et al., 2004)

After showing the participants a slogan about Extension:

- What do you think when you see this slogan?

- What do the words mean to you?

- Do you think this slogan reflects what you know to be the purpose of UF/IFAS Extension?

(Irani et al., 2006)

Participants may deviate from a topic during the interview. In this case, the moderator must re-focus the group on the issue (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Selecting and Recruiting the Participants

Identifying Participants

Participant selection and recruitment is a critical step in the focus group process. In order to form fairly homogeneous groups, participants are usually selected on the basis of certain common characteristics. For example, high school seniors, master gardeners, citrus growers, women with home-based businesses, part-time farmers, etc. are types of homogeneous groups which might be used for focus groups.

Another selection criterion is whether people have participated in your Extension program. Focus groups of program participants can tell how they have been helped and why they participated. On the other hand, focus groups of nonparticipants can tell us why they did not participate and can help to identify ways to expand the outreach of the program.

Recruiting Participants

Once participants for the focus groups have been identified, the next challenge is getting them to attend. A personalized invitation should be extended and reminders by mail or telephone should be used immediately prior to the session. Four to ten participants usually constitute a focus group. The effectiveness of the focus group can be maximized if the size of the group can be kept to 6 to 8 people. Because some people will be absent (even though

they have accepted the invitation), over-recruiting is recommended. Krueger and Casey (2000) recommend inviting an excess of 20% to 50% participants unless you are sure that every individual will attend.

Site Selection and Equipment

Use the Right Room

Focus groups work best when the participants are comfortable. Assuming a group of 8 to 10, a small meeting room away from potential distractions, such as a noisy hallway or lunchroom, is preferred. You also may want an available blackboard or flip chart for recording key comments or ideas during the session.

Recording Information

We recommend recording the focus group session so that the full dialog, as well as major points offered by the participants, will be captured. If you decide to do so, obtain a recorder which is designed for use in group situations. Test out your equipment under similar conditions (i.e., with a group of co-workers) since some recorders work better than others. Remember that poor recordings mean valuable information is lost. It is always a good idea to have two audio recorders for use with each session. Avoid using the voice-activated feature on your recorder because soft-spoken persons across the room may not activate the device and information will be lost. Some qualitative analytical techniques require recording of the interview in such a way that periods of silence can be noted.

With the increasing availability of video cameras, you may wish to videotape the focus group. However, the nature of the topic or sensitivity of the individuals in the focus group might preclude using this method or audio recordings. This material may be useful if the analytical procedure that you wish to follow requires further analysis of the group interactions and body language of participants. We recommend using the video recording only as a secondary source of data given the large amount of time required to conduct a proper analysis.

In any event, you should be prepared to rely on written field notes in case you experience a problem with the equipment. This is why we recommend having an observer take notes during the focus group so you can concentrate on moderating the session.

Tips on Managing the Focus Group Session

The key to conducting successful focus group sessions can be traced to effective group management. Your role is to present stimulating questions for the group to discuss. You may want to write ideas and comments on a flipchart to stimulate discussion and record information. Once you present a question to the group, it is important to step back and allow the discussion to progress with only a minimal amount of interruption on your part. However, there are some important tips for you to consider as you seek to foster a successful discussion among the participants:

- allow periods of silence;

- avoid asking questions that seem to suggest a "correct" answer;

- try not to let strong personalities dominate the discussion;

- encourage input by those who are less inclined to speak out on the questions being discussed;

- make every effort to practice good listening skills.

Conducting the Focus Group Session

There are three key phases for the focus group interview. First, set the stage for discussion. Second, conduct the discussion. Third, tie up any loose ends.

Setting the Stage for Discussion

Review the Purpose

Begin the focus group session by informing the participants about its purpose. Although participants will know in a general way what the focus group is about when they are invited, you should clarify the purpose for them so that each participant can focus his/her comments on the relevant issues.

Set the Ground Rules

Along with stating the purpose of the focus group, you should review the ground rules for the session. Such ground rules can include a reminder that everyone is encouraged to express their opinion, that there are no correct or incorrect answers to any of the questions, that everyone's opinion is valuable and shall be respected, and that a certain amount of time will be allocated to each question. This also is a good time to inform the group that the session will be recorded, let them know that this is done so that all their ideas and thoughts can be captured.

The following introduction was used for the evaluation of what high school students learned while participating in conducting a community needs assessment survey (If you plan to publish your findings, make sure that the protocol of the study is reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board in advance. Information of this process can be found at www.irb.ufl.edu and follow the link to IRB-02.)

"Today, I want to spend a few minutes discussing your experiences with living in Immokalee. Specifically, I want to hear your views about Immokalee's problems and how people, including yourselves, work to solve them. Over the next several minutes, I'm going to ask you a few questions. Please share your honest opinions and thoughts on each of the questions. Your input is an important part of our effort to better understand how you and others like you feel that they fit into the community of Immokalee."

"I also want to remind you that you participation is voluntary. You do not have to answer any question you do not wish to answer. You may leave at any time you wish. The information which you give will only be used by the University of Florida people who are designing the program. No type of report will be prepared that identifies the views of any participant. Each individual's comments will be kept confidential."

Conducting the Discussion

During this stage of the session, you should focus on your set of questions. Ask only one question at a time and try to introduce the questions in an order that follows conversational norms. Feel free to use a flipchart to write down key points offered by participants to each question. In fact, this is quite helpful to your group since it allows participants a chance to study and react to what others individuals have offered in response to the questions, and you may use it as a guide for further probing.

Tying Up Loose Ends

It's a good idea to bring some closure to the meeting at the end of the focus group session. This can be done by providing a brief summary of the major points that were raised by the participants over the course of the session. The group should then be given the opportunity to verify this summary. Finally, remember to express your appreciation to the participants for providing valuable input on the extension program.

Analysis of the Focus Group Session

to your topic of study. Next, you will need to assign open codes to the different pieces of text. Open coding is a grounded and systematic process in which the labels for the codes are, ideally, taken directly from the text (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003) . The best way to do the open coding is by identifying the key word or words in a sentence or paragraph and using them directly as the code, or part of the code, for that specific segment; Figure 1 shows an example of open coding from a study on conservation practices among university students. As you progress in the coding, you will notice that some of the codes are repeated or at least closely related.

When all the coding is finished, the next step is to group the codes into broader categories or themes (Morgan, 1997). The themes will provide the basis for building the discussion of the findings. Note that these themes are verified when two or more groups include them in their discussion. This increases the credibility of statements which might be made about the design of a program or its impact. It is very important to be aware that some codes cannot be grouped under the main categories or themes; this is natural and there is no need to force them to fit. Most likely, the segments of text where you found those

Line	Transcript text	Open code
24 25 26 27	*Participant:* Conservation is good for the environment in general. It is good for the future of the land that we are living on. It is good for the future of our children and the next generation… It is a wise use of resources.	positive, future impacts on land and people, wisdom
28 29	*Interviewer:* How do you feel engaging in conservation practices?	
30 31 32	*Participant:* I feel good. I try to do extra .**[prolonged silence]** As far of the recycling of things, I go out of my way to try to find a recycling canister. If I am going to recycle my soda can, or…	good feeling, extra effort involved, availability of infrastructure, recycling canister,…

Figure 1. Opencoding

If you have taken notes, you are ready to begin your analysis. If you have recorded your focus group interviews (which is desirable), the first step is to transcribe the information. Note that transcription needs to be as close to verbatim as possible and it can be expensive, time consuming, and difficult, especially if the recordings are of poor quality.

Analysis begins with a careful reading of the transcripts and interview notes. Through the reading, you can identify the paragraphs or portions of text that are meaningful and yield rich knowledge related

codes belong to other themes that were not the main focus of your study; the best thing is not to include them in your analysis. More information on the steps for qualitative data analysis can be found in the EDIS publication "Handling qualitative data: A guide for Extension Professionals" (Galindo-Gonzalez & Israel, Forthcoming).

The results of a focus group are not reported as numbers because focus group data are not suited for this purpose. Instead we use words to describe what the data show. The unit of analysis is the Group and

not the individual participants. For instance, you should not say, "60% of the group members identified the location of the field office as a barrier for participating in the program, while the remaining 40% attributed the lack of participation to the high cost of transportation." You may say however, "The group considered both the inadequate location of the field office and the high costs of transportation as factors in the reduced participation in the program."

Limitations of Focus Groups

Although the great strength of focus groups lies in the richness of the information that participants provide, there are limits to the method's applications. Focus groups *can* identify the types of needs for or impacts of a program and reasons for these. But in the case of impacts, focus groups *cannot* tell you how many people were helped by the program or the amount of an impact because focus groups do not provide inferential statistics as a survey using a random sample would. The goal of focus groups is not to generalize to a larger population but to provide valuable information that the insightful reader may transfer to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) .

Summary

The focus group interview has proven to be a useful method for designing Extension programs and collecting evaluation data. Moreover, skill in conducting focus groups can be developed quickly. When used appropriately, the focus group can provide rich, qualitative information for use with your educational programs.

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