

# **Focus Groups and Student Learning Assessment**

# What is a Focus Group?

- A focus group is a guided discussion whose intent is to gather open-ended comments about a specific issue
- For student learning assessment, "specific issue" usually means student learning objectives
- Usually involves a moderator, and between six and twelve participants who are chosen from a specific area of interest
- Requires careful creation of an interview guide after consultation with the interested parties (department chairs, etc.)
- Requires careful content analysis
- Often used as a qualitative method of assessment in combination with other assessment methods (questionnaires, field observations, etc.)
- Appears simple, but actually involves much work and coordination

# Examples

- Salem State College used focus groups to evaluate course objectives in health and wellness courses. The results confirmed survey results and helped the college identify benefits gleaned from the course as a result of instruction (1999)
- The University of Puerto Rico in Humacao used focus groups as a method of increasing response rates on alumni surveys (1999)
- The University of South Florida used focus groups to better understand the antecedents of statistics anxiety, and reported that a rich source of information was gleaned from the exercise (1999)
- Indiana State University's graduate programs in its College of Education (M.Ed. Program) organized a focus group to gather faculty members' evaluation of student performance in respect to the standards of the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) (1999).

# Critical Components of a Focus Group

- Specific purpose
- Interview guide
- Participants
- Moderator
- Analysis
- Report

In this presentation, each of the above is discussed in turn...

# Specific Purpose

- There should be a specific reason for conducting the focus group. Usually, this involves connecting the questions to be asked with the open-ended questions asked of participants in the focus group
- Possible questions to ask before conducting a focus group as a method of assessment:
  - To whom will the focus group results be reported to?
  - Will these results be combined with results of other studies (this is usually preferable)
  - Given that notes will have to be analyzed, participants recruited, etc., will conducting the focus group be worth the resources expended?

# Interview Guide

- After discussing the specific purpos(es) for the focus group with department chairs or other program leaders, an interview guide should be written that includes 3-6 questions, with possible follow up questions
- The first question should be general in form, followed by specific questions; the final question should also be general in form
- Questions on the interview guide should be shared with those interested in the results of the focus group to check for wording, etc.

# Questionnaire

- If faculty are participating in the focus group, and the purpose of the focus group is to evaluate student learning, it is a good idea to ask them to review samples of student work prior to the focus group so they are prepared to comment to the focus group questions
- An alternative is to engage them in an activity prior to the focus group in which they evaluate student work samples
- In both cases, it is a good idea to ask participants to complete a closed-ended questionnaire during the focus group. The results can then be included in the focus group report, and can be used as a means of assessing agreement with certain important issues while writing the report.

# Example—Matching Focus Group Questions with Standards/Student Learning Outcomes

In this case, the graduate department in charge of the M.Ed. Department was interested in gathering the graduate faculty's thoughts on how well students enrolled in that program were meeting NBPTS standard 5.

**NBPTS 5: Teachers Contribute to School Effectiveness by Collaborating With Other Professionals**

**Focus Group Question**

5.1: Teachers contribute to school effectiveness by collaborating with other professionals

1. Working with other professionals such as school counselors, speech and language professionals for example, is an important aspect to effective teaching, and especially important in improving a unit's effectiveness. During the course of their enrollment in the program, how well do students learn to collaborate with other professionals to contribute to school effectiveness (including CIMT and EESE)?

5.2: Teachers work collaboratively with parents

Follow-up (if necessary):

5.3: Teachers take advantage of community resources

- What weaknesses do students in your programs possess that graduate programs should focus on?
- How can students improve in their collaboration with other professionals—for example, CIMT graduate students with SLP professionals, or EESE students with SPED (or the reverse)?



# Recruiting Participants

- Number of participants—lower bound is six, upper bound is twelve.
- Use of more than one focus group is fine as long as similar questions and moderator techniques are used
- Make sure that participants are directly able to comment on subject of study.
- Random selection would be nice, but is not necessary

# Moderator

- Use of a skillful moderator may be the most important methodological issue
- Must be able to facilitate discussion
- Should be able to encourage input by all participants
- Ethical note: The moderator must be skilled enough not to lead discussion to subject area(s) he/she is interested in, or not to lead participants to agree to a solution that he/she is personally invested in. Having a moderator from outside the department or program is therefore a good idea.

# Note Taking

- Video or audio taping is sometimes used, but in an academic or institutional environment (where learning outcomes are being discussed) this may not be acceptable to participants
- Appoint a skilled note taker who is not a member of the focus group
- Notes taken at the group might involve verbatim notes, or notes that reflect consensus comments of the group
- A combination of the two above options may be the best option
- After the group, notes should be sent to focus group participants so they can offer input about their accuracy

# Conducting the Group

- A typical focus group should take between one and two hours
- A location should be chosen that would facilitate open comment
- Seating should facilitate discussion
- Providing food is a great idea
- Beginning with a general question or activity might facilitate discussion

# Analysis of Focus Group Comments—Part I

- After the focus group is over, moderator should write own reflections so s/he could check for accuracy
- It is usually a good idea for the note taker to take notes on a laptop so notes can be quickly printed

# Analysis of Focus Group Comments—Part II

- Code comments according to whether they are consensus comments (some computer programs might help with this)
- If using a questionnaire, use this as a guide (on a five-point scale, standard deviations larger than 1 may indicate low levels of agreement, for example)
- Determine which consensus comments related to student learning objectives or the original purposes of the focus group, and which relate to general themes. Include both in the report.

# Testing for Validity

- As mentioned, ask focus group participants to review notes
- Have a partner evaluate transcript to check inappropriate perceptions

# Writing the Report

- After finding consensus comments, organize reports according to original purpose(s) of the focus group.
- If purpose of focus group is to evaluate a number of student learning objectives, organize report according to those objectives
- Remember to include discussion of unanticipated themes in the report.



# Communicating Results

- Send report to constituents and participants for comment prior to final submission
- As mentioned above, it is always a good idea to list standards of a program and include the focus group results of one of several assessments used to make conclusions about student learning

Example....

Program standards/student learning objectives are listed in first column

### M.Ed. In Curriculum and Instruction Student Learning Outcomes

	Alumni Surveys	Employer Surveys	Focus Group
Teachers seek advice of others and draw on education research and scholarship to improve their practice	On survey question, "Ability to apply appropriate methodologies to the solution of educational questions," alumni rated their preparation as "somewhat prepared"	On survey question, "applying appropriate research methodologies (or best practices) to the solution of educational questions," employers rated their employees' preparation as "well prepared."	Faculty rated this item on a questionnaire between "moderately prepared" and "well prepared." Panel participants praised graduate students on knowledge of education research and scholarship, but felt that students should be held more accountable for applying this knowledge
Teachers appreciate how knowledge in their subjects is created, organized, and linked to other disciplines	On survey question, "ability to understand how other professional areas in education can work together to enhance learning," alumni rated their preparation as "somewhat prepared."	On survey question, "ability to understand how other professional areas in education can work together to enhance learning," employers rated their preparation as "well prepared."	Faculty rated this item on a questionnaire between "moderately prepared" and "well prepared." Panel participants praised graduate students for their willingness to collaborate with other professionals and their knowledge of various resources. They felt that students needed more training in respect to referring students to school services in order to enhance learning; they also felt that students needed to network more with other students in the College of Education

Focus group, employer survey, and alumni survey results are used to evaluate the two student learning objectives in the left-hand column. At a later point, this is share with faculty in the program so they are able to determine what they say about strengths/weaknesses in their program.

# Concerns

- Focus group participants are not anonymous. Therefore, in an academic environment, if there are any differences in influences among the participants (tenured v. non-tenured, for example), then the probability of open discussion may be reduced
- Although great care may be taken to write an interview guide, the moderator may not get to all the questions
- The process is time consuming

# Conclusion

- Focus groups add a good amount of open-ended, unconstrained information
- When compared with direct assessments of student learning, focus groups may contribute additional information about student learning that would otherwise not be identified through rubrics or instruments containing closed-ended questions