



GREY MATTERS

A Guide to Collaborative Research with Seniors

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Appendix 5

Focus Group Training Notes

Nancy Marlett, with team leaders
Prepared for the Centre of Excellence

A focus group can refer to any group that meets with the purpose of exploring a specific and well-defined topic. There is usually a facilitator who ensures that everyone has input. There are many tasks to perform and everyone will have a specific role.

Setting the Stage

What have you learned about the possibilities of doing research with your site?

For example, do the group members know each other well? What brings them together? How might this lead you to use their common interests as a starting point for your study?

How many people would likely make a good focus group? (Focus groups tend to range between six and fifteen members.) How would you select and invite those that might be interested or those you would like to select?

Where and when should the meeting take place? Focus groups tend to be engaging, so people want to spend some time. You could meet for one or two hours or you could meet for an entire day if you feel the group is able to sustain energy that long.

Is your group likely to want to discuss and share ideas in general or would they want to have some concrete product at the end of the day? What kind of product would they be interested in?

The Invitation for the Day

An invitation to _____ (your site group)

Date, time, location, and parking

Hosted by the _____ and sponsored by _____

The topic of the day will be _____

By the end of the day you will have _____

Your facilitators for the day are:
list each researcher with a brief description.

Please let us know if you are interested by phoning _____

Tasks for the Day

There are a large number of tasks involved in running a focus group. You will need to decide who is to do each task and practice the tasks you have:

- Sending out invitations and following up with prospective participants to explain what the project is and what your role is in the research. This will also include the consent to take part in the focus group forms (see attached).
- Getting the refreshments and the room set up.
- Welcoming people, making sure that they are introduced to each of the researchers.
- Recording the discussion of the group on flip charts. (Needs to have good handwriting and be able to summarize information, this also entails providing feedback to the group if requested.)
- Recording the process of the group (as in observation research). This will involve using a notebook and recording interest, emotions, consensus, key points of interest, etc.
- Assisting with the facilitation. You may choose to divide the process of the focus group into sections so that you can share facilitation.
- Completing an evaluation with each of the participants at the end of the session. This can be done with the group, comments on how comfortable people felt, what they were pleased with and what could be improved. You may also wish to invite individuals to take part in future research.

- Writing up the results of the flip charts and the materials from the recordings of the group process. This will likely be done by the people who are doing the recordings.
- You may wish to do a follow-up to thank people and send them a copy of the materials that have come from the focus group.

Setting the Tone

A focus group is only as good as the ‘goodwill’ of those participating. It is important that the group feel safe and secure in sharing their ideas, that they will not be embarrassed or criticized. This can be done by sharing some ‘rules’ to start with. For example, you might write on the flip chart: Respect everyone’s ideas, listen and don’t interrupt, be creative in trying out new ways of thinking, speak up if you are unsure, are uncomfortable, or are lost. You can also begin with some “ice breakers” if the group does not know each other.

You might post ideas from other groups on the wall as people come in. Celebrating their ideas might set the tone. You can use ideas from the workshops that have been run to date. You can also post inspirational sayings that you think might appeal. You could have people jot down their own ideas on the posted sheets.

During the session, it is very important to stay in touch with the group and each individual. It may be that the person is shy or he or she may be very reluctant to say something that presents a very different way of thinking. You may need to use prompts such as: could we hear from this side of the room? Does anyone have a really different idea here? How is everyone feeling about what we’ve done so far?

Group Processes

There are several general processes that you can choose from, once you have your question. These are presented below, from open-ended PAR processes to those that are more highly structured.

PAR-based processes. With PAR, participants have input into the questions and processes so the first task of the facilitator is to run through several possibilities while also soliciting ideas from the group. The goal is to end up with a list of topics people want to discuss.

Structured questions. The questions we used in the first workshops at Kerby were: Do you remember a time when you realized that you or someone you were close to was resilient. How did you know it was resilience when you look back on it? These questions engage the person in creating their own definitions.

Brainstorming. Participants offer the first ideas that come to their head. All ideas must be recorded. Then the group or the facilitator takes the time to look at relationships between the ideas. This requires that the flip chart recorder is quick and accurate, always checking to make sure that they have recorded the idea accurately.

These ideas can be analyzed and presented in booklet form for follow-up focus groups. Appendix 7 and 8 is the most recent rural workbook that summarizes the knowledge that they generated in their previous workshop

Delphi techniques. These techniques are often used when people want to provide a sharper focus to discussion. In Delphi (Linstone & Turoff, 1975), participants think about a question on their own (usually this involves writing ideas down) for a short time period (usually about five minutes). The person chooses one or two ideas to share that they are most committed to and these are written on the flip chart.

The group prioritizes ideas to take to the next stage. Currently a popular method is to give everyone sticky dots (three to five, depending upon the size of the group) and each person can ‘vote’ for the ideas they are most committed to.

Once the top three to five ideas are voted on, the next step might be to think about barriers to achieving each of the ideas. You might also look at how groups might support the ideas. You might also bridge to research ideas from the ideas chosen.



Bob Stebbins

Working on this project was a natural fit for us as retired researchers. It was fun to work on research without the politics of university grants and it was good to work with other seniors. It would be wonderful to build a network of trained senior researchers across Canada, able to work in partnership with non-academic seniors and policy makers.