

Focus Groups

What is a focus group?

Practical Considerations

- Size of the group
- Selecting participants
- Group Dynamics
- Purposive Sample
- Asking Questions:
“Talk to me about ...”



Roles in a focus Group

- Facilitator
- Speaker
- Observer

Phases in a focus Group

- Setting the scene
- Starting Points
- Getting Going
- In full flow
- Approximate Timings

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<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/events/capacitybuilding/index.php>

What is a Focus Group?

Features

- A group discussion of a particular topic
- An environment in which to share ideas
- The meeting of a community of practice
- The use of a purposive sample of people to test some general views or ideas
- A group interview
- A lesson
- **THIS IS A FOCUS GROUP!**

Size of Group

- Ideally 6-12 people but could be as small as 4 if they are 'expert witnesses' for example.
- With a main question to answer you may form several groups from your purposive sample and then collate the discussions to form a more general opinion.

Selecting the 'participants'

Depending on your subject any or all of the following MAY be important:

- Age and Gender
- Year group (young people)
- Subject specialism
- Faculty/Discipline
- Role/Responsibilities
- Experience of the issue/topic/question

Group Dynamics

- If several groups are to be held on the same subject then it will be important to try to maintain the balance of particular elements within the groups – age and gender for example.
- Some focus groups are ‘self-selecting’ the issue appeals to some people who then choose to join the group for the discussion, this method can be used for research purposes.

What is a 'purposive sample'

- A selected group of the people who are most likely to be able to talk about your question or issue.
- A purposive sample is used in smaller scale research work where time is of the essence and where you only want the opinions of people who are concerned in some way with the topic.
- You must be able to articulate why the sample was chosen when you report your findings.
- A purposive sample would not allow you to generalise to a wider less 'select' population.
- Qualitative data is normally not generalisable, but is usually 'relatable' to other contexts.

‘Talk to me about.....’

- Pose a big question – be prepared to explain it or share examples from your own experience.
- Allow the discussion free rein but keep it on track, feedback loops are important here.
- Try to ensure that no-one person dominates the discussion and that weaker respondents are given a chance to speak.
- Try to prevent confrontation that does not add to knowledge and upsets the discussion.

The 'roles' within a focus group

- The 'controller' of the group will be the facilitator, who has particular feats to perform listed next.
- Most of the group will be 'speakers' who will more or less interrupt the discussion at different times to put their own points of view.
- All potential speakers should be encouraged both before and during their speaking moments.
- Some of the group may find themselves 'observing' – some of these 'watchers' will feel frustrated by their own inability to interrupt, or by lack of self-esteem or courage to put their own point of view.
 - **The facilitator needs to be aware of these participants and try to include them if possible.**

The Facilitator

Thinking on your feet!

- Should be attentive to the speaker
- Use encouraging body language
- Reflect back the interpreted thoughts and feelings
- Summarise the conversation to give direction
- Encourage deeper reflection into such things as – motivation, attitude, feelings, tacit knowledge
- Accept constructive silences
- Gently pursue the topic after a silence
- Accept a change of tack
- Accept and encourage development of ideas beyond the initial suggestions
- Enable the speaker to reconstruct experience



Speakers

Just begin when they are ready ...

- If the group are well chosen (a purposive sample) then they will be familiar with the topic to be discussed, or have pertinent experience.
- It may be something that has been a personal or professional triumph, or challenge; this type of focus group may be discussing or evaluating an event or programme.
- A situation in which they felt de-skilled or challenged or one in which they felt 'out of control.'
- Something that they feel strongly about – either negatively or positively, this might be a controversial issue in the news.

The Observer (s)

Watch the action of the conversation

Although they might want to join in, while they are in a watching position they will be looking at or for:

- Effective body language that is enabling
- Body language that restricts or curtails a speaker
- Words and phrases that help a speaker to sustain the topic
- Words and phrases that 'take over' rather than extend the dialogue
- A method of encouraging the speaker to develop ideas beyond what (s/he) might be expecting to do – enabling deeper reflection
- How the facilitator handles conflict, aggression, embarrassment
- Constructive silence and lack of tension
- If the facilitator can create a dialogue that contributes to shared understanding.

If they experience positive encouragement then they may find a way to join in; if they do not feel 'safe' to contribute then they may feel frustrated, bored and excluded. This is particularly true of young people who then may try more disruptive tactics.



The Facilitator of a Focus Group

- May be a member of a community of practice that is carrying out 'Action Research' for its own development.
- May be an external researcher with specialist knowledge in the subject area.
- May be a peer researcher seeking additional information for a personal research project.



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See also
section

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Evaluation
Practicalities

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Set the scene

**Explain the
research to the
group
Facilitators role
and responsibility
The selection
process**

**Discuss timings
and Recording
methods**

**Create a
'Safe
environment'**

**Discuss ethical
practices
Confidentiality &
Respect for group
'confessions'**



Starting Points

Identification
Exercise:
Name, year group,
subjects studied etc.
*(this fixes voices for
transcription)*

Main question or
issue on a slide
or flip chart –
keep the focus

Read the question:
ensure shared
understanding
*(reading it is best
practice
for inclusivity)*





Getting Going

As part of shared understanding, get each member to give a definition.

Create a proper 'dialogue' between you and the group. Do not have pre-conceived ideas

Be ready to say '*Hey that's interesting,*
or '*I hadn't thought of that*" **or**
'glad you introduced that idea" etc



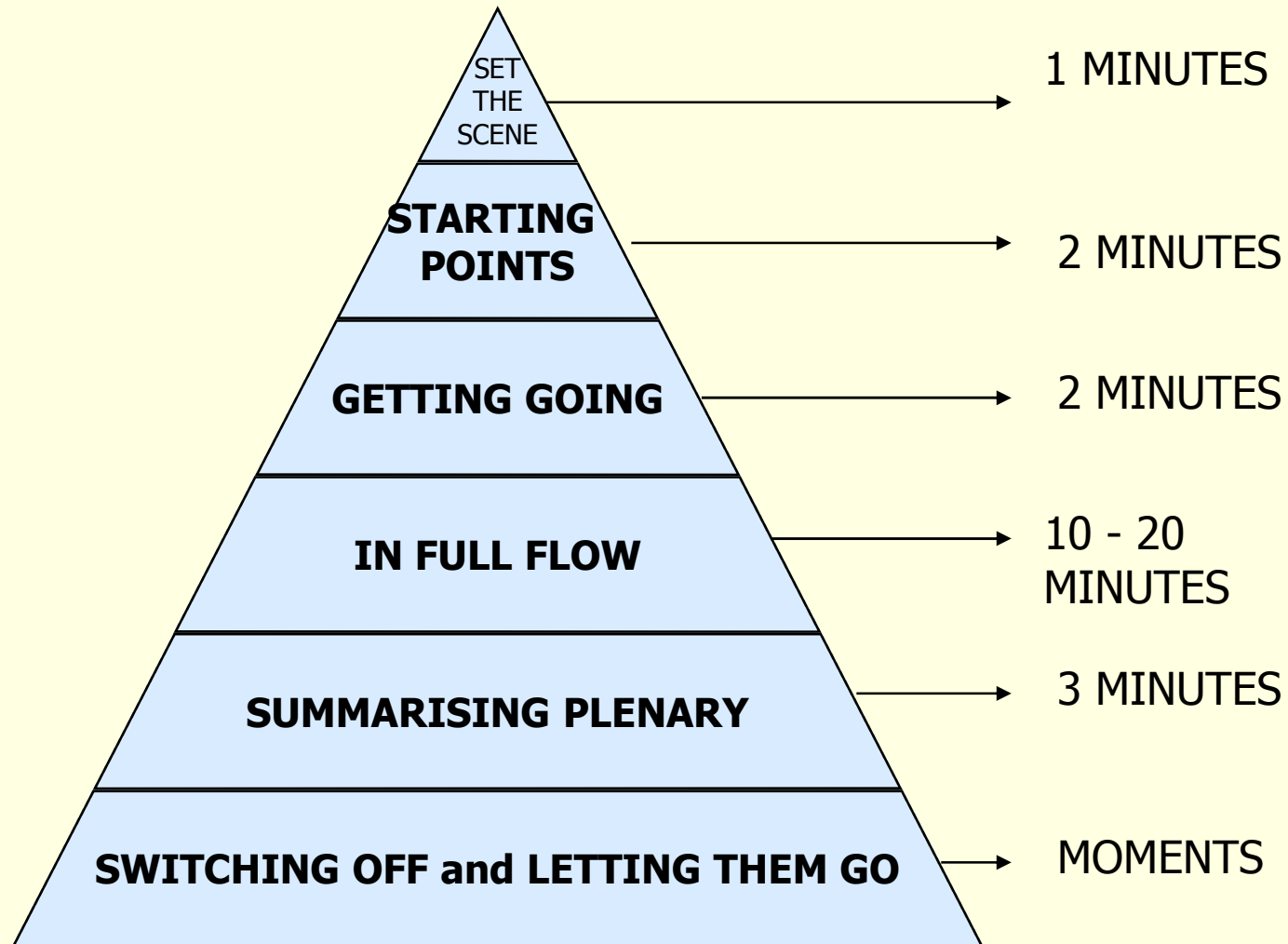
In Full Flow

While they are talking on track, you may not need to intervene

Intervention is for:
Refocusing
Protecting
Empowering
Clarification
Feedback loops

Continually ensure shared understanding of words, phrases and ideas & look interested!





A fifteen minute quality discussion will generate between 3 & 5000 words of rich material that needs transcribing or listening to for interpretation and analysis.



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Final Cautionary Tales!

- It is better to have 15 minutes of dynamic interaction than 30 minutes of rambling and repetition. If the time stretches out for too long then the innovative ideas get lost in the 'swampy lowlands'. **KEEP FOCUSED!**
- It's particularly rewarding to get people involved who do not normally meet or work together – real reflection and innovation often occurs at this time and it is especially satisfying to get that buzz of collaboration when they leave the room still discussing the ideas they have heard.
- Do not switch off the recording equipment too soon – often some of the richest data occurs after the mic has been turned off when people just chat to you as they are leaving – it's really annoying!



Evaluation Capacity Building in Widening Participation Practice



ECB Toolkit Website:

www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/events/capacitybuilding/index.php

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