



INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

OVERVIEW

Interviews and focus groups yield qualitative data about specific issues. A systematic analysis of the data collected provides insights about the ways in which an experience or activity is perceived by the participants. Outcomes and conclusions derived from interviews and focus groups are rarely generalizable to other groups of people and contexts, but they are powerful tools for identifying key issues, elaborating on relevant themes, informing quantitative responses, and obtaining reflective feedback from participants.

Interviews and focus groups provide opportunities to cover a broad range of topics and explore issues of interest in great detail. While interviews are conversations between the interviewer and only one participant, focus groups are moderated meetings involving a group typically between four and eight participants and one or two facilitators. Focus group participants generally have common characteristics (e.g., students of the same course/program) and may or may not be familiar with each other. Both interviews and focus groups are used to discuss participants' experiences and perceptions; they are useful either as stand-alone tools or as a complement to other evaluation approaches.

DEVELOPMENT

Interviews and focus groups are typically guided by a protocol or script of predetermined questions. The script keeps the interaction focused and allows the interviewer(s) to cover the same ground with different participants. Creating an interview/focus group protocol requires careful planning and decision-making around question wording, order, and length. Generally speaking, protocols can be catalogued as structured when the order and wording of questions matters and questions are meant to be asked in exactly the same way across participants. Protocols can be catalogued as semi-structured when some flexibility is allowed in how questions are posed to participants and the order in which they are covered. In education research and evaluation, semi-structured protocols are commonly used as they allow for some freedom in the interaction and create a more conversational atmosphere in the session. It is also possible to conduct interviews in an unstructured manner, where no formal protocol is used, but the chance of missing important information is high with this approach.

It is recommended to design questions that elicit detailed responses and to avoid questions that call for yes/no answers. Questions starting with "how" or "why" generally lead to deeper participant reflection.

IMPLEMENTATION

Interviews and focus groups are frequently included in summative evaluation efforts as a strategy to ask survey participants for clarification or further details on relevant or intriguing survey results. However, they can also be used as formative tools in the early developmental stages of projects to inform decision-making or the survey design process.

Implementing interviews and focus groups requires preparation and training. The facilitator is not only responsible for listening, observing, and guiding the conversation, but also for setting a relaxed atmosphere where participants feel confident and willing to share honest perspectives and insights. To avoid bias in responses and obtain candid answers, the facilitator and participants are typically unfamiliar with each other.

Both interviews and focus groups are normally recorded either through field notes, audio recording, video, or a mix of these. Recordings are usually transcribed for further thematic analysis. The facilitator can also take notes during the interviews and keep a record of key points in the conversation. These notes are usually helpful when making sense of the data.

ADVANTAGES

- Yields rich qualitative data from participants (e.g., perspectives, reflections, ideas) in a short period of time.
- Can cover a broad range of topics and content.
- Provides the opportunity to ask participants for clarification or further detail around key issues, including those identified through surveys.
- Allows for individualized questions and the exploration of unanticipated issues.
- Sources of data for triangulation when used in conjunction with other evaluation methods.
- Inexpensive to administer if run in low numbers.

DISADVANTAGES

- May be difficult to coordinate.
- Numerous interviews can be timely to implement.
- Facilitator training required.
- Potentially threatening or intimidating to participants, thus biasing results.
- Data analysis may be complex, time consuming, and require specialized skillsets.
- Not suited for generalizations about populations.

STRATEGIES TO MITIGATE DISADVANTAGES

- Construct protocol carefully with support from experts. Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology staff support interview and focus group protocol development and may be able to provide limited support for facilitation and analysis.
- Offer training to facilitators and interviewers on how to use open-ended questions, pauses and probes, when and how to move from topic to topic, and how to bring in the appropriate degree of direction during the conversations.
 - Over-recruit participants in order to secure successful data collection. Response rates can further be optimized by implementing interviews over the phone.
 - Interview and focus group data analysis should meet the rigour of sound qualitative practices. Expertise in this field is recommended in order to define a data collection and data analysis plan based on available resources.

UBC RESOURCES

For more information about interview and focus group design, project evaluation, or educational research, contact:

Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology
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