Conducting A Focus Group

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Abstract

Conducting focus groups seems to be a process that is practically intuitive. However, this key practice in qualitative research requires that a novice facilitator must do his or her homework. This article describes the process by which I became more cognizant of the tools necessary to be successful in planning and running focus groups. The article provides information about books and articles that were useful in providing practical information. It also details the use of the "learning-by-doing" journey embarked upon at my institution, whereby we conducted 56 town hall meetings over a four month time period using a focus group approach to gain understanding about key constituents' beliefs about engagement at the institution.

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Conducting focus groups seems to be a process that is practically intuitive. However, this key practice in qualitative research requires that a novice facilitator must do his or her homework. This article describes the process by which I became more cognizant of the tools necessary to be successful in planning and running focus groups. The article provides information about books and articles that were useful in providing practical information. It also details the use of the "learning-by-doing" journey embarked upon at my institution, whereby we conducted 56 town hall meetings over a four month time period using a focus group approach to gain understanding about key constituents' beliefs about engagement at the institution. Key Words: Qualitative Research, Focus Group, Traditional Face-To-Face Focus Groups, and Group Interviews

A researcher must sometimes hone skills that might seem to be intuitive or common sense. Conducting focus groups seemed to me to be a skill set that might not require extensive training. In my role as executive director of quality assessment of community and institutional effectiveness, a large scale project on assessment of institutional "engagement" became a main focus and occupied 75% of my time over a three-year period. The project, in cooperation with the Gallup organization, included the development of three separate, web-based surveys for three distinct constituent groups (alumni, employees, and students). It included the collection of the data using a web-based tool, coordination of the interpretation of the data, dissemination of the results, and organizing the training of more than 300 supervisors to complete commitment plans for quality improvement at this higher educational institution, based on the data.

At first blush, the project did not encompass the need for the use of data collection from focus groups. However, as the project rolled out, the university's chancellor, along with his leadership team, determined that his personal commitment plan to enhance dialogue among the 4000+ employees at the university would best be served by holding "town hall meetings", essentially focus groups. These meetings were designed by me, with input from colleagues in the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, to gather additional information and input from constituents regarding how the institution might improve internal communication and about issues facing faculty, staff and administration that impact providing quality education by highly engaged workgroups, each working to best serve students.

In order to carry out a quality research project that utilizes qualitative methodology, the researcher should be well versed in all aspects of data collection. In this particular instance, it became quickly apparent that there were many decisions and questions to be answered prior to actually engaging in the data collection process. Understanding the various methods available would improve the decision-making

process—ultimately producing a credible study that would be well-received by the university leadership.

A variety of steps will be described in this article that enabled me to become more competent in the role assigned as facilitator/coordinator/recorder of the 54 employee focus groups that were conducted as well as the two additional student focus groups that ensued. First, taking a class in qualitative research provided a venue to explore data collection methods in greater detail. Having two experienced and renowned qualitative researchers as instructors was certainly a bonus. Moreover, having one of those researchers (along with his library) available in my office suite was a boon. Being able to share ideas and experiences about data collection with peer students and colleagues provided support as well as insights and suggestions.

Being able to choose specific topics for assignments within a given course within the qualitative research certificate program that would positively impact my work setting and job function was extraordinary. As such, I determined that learning more about focus groups would be one of the strands pursued in class via assignments. An initial class assignment was pursued to develop a power point presentation about focus groups. In preparing for that assignment, this researcher found, and particularly liked, the definition of focus groups provided by Kitzinger and Barbour (1999). A focus group can be any group discussion, as long as the researcher is actively encouraging of, and attentive to, the group interaction. This characterization provided the underlying philosophy of the university town hall meeting concept to be conducted over a four month time period. To me, the components of that definition included that the participants "engage" with one another, the researcher serves as a guide, the researcher provides a topical guide and the researcher observes the group dynamics. This became the hallmark of each of the 56 town hall meetings/focus groups that were conducted.

To better understand all of the dynamics and components of traditional focus groups, I turned to Barbour (2008) to provide an excellent overview. Her text *Doing Focus Groups* introduces topics related to focus groups, including discussions about the use of focus groups, major variations in focus group research, defining the features inherent in the focus group process, and key procedures to consider. I particularly found the chapters on planning, materials, and documentation to be extremely helpful. The text also provides an overview of required researcher skills providing excellent explanation of some of the attributes associated with successful moderators and why these requisite skills will enhance the collection of data using focus group activities.

A number of ethical concerns outlined in the Barbour (2008) text provided food for thought for me. The focus groups (town hall meetings) that were to be conducted at my institution included the presence of the university chancellor and the topics to be explored might have substantial impact upon the participants. Barbour addresses impacts of a cathartic nature, the impact of sensitive topics (such as supervisor/supervisee issues within the workplace), and factors that might impact feelings both during the session and following the session. I found the guide to be extremely helpful in planning for the sessions and considering some of the aspects of the process that called for ethical decision-making.

Other insights into planning for an interview or group discussion were afforded by Chrzanowska (2003) in her chapter in the book entitled *Interviewing Groups and Individuals in Qualitative Market Research*. I learned that the planning process must be

more than preparing a list of questions. The researcher must think about the location and layout of the group session and how that location/layout might impact participation. The researcher carefully chose venues that would allow for easy discussion as well as comfort. In order to further enhance the feeling of relaxed discussion, snacks as well as beverages were provided.

The interview guide is crucial, along with the ability to make educated decisions about follow-up questions, allotment of time to question-asking and to responding, and the impact that experience has upon the moderator. Not surprisingly, by the mid-point of conducting 56 group meetings, both the chancellor and the moderator were seasoned not only in the manner in which the questions were framed but also in their sensitivity to group dynamics!

Morgan (1998) indicates that focus groups are not designed to serve as either a support group of psychotherapy session. The author further stipulates that the goal of a focus group is not to promote "consensus-building or decision-making". The goal should be to gather information based on the participants' interactions in a given setting. In our cases, it was to gather information about communication, collaboration, and supervisory work group interactions within the institution's academic and administrative/support units. While this institution's participants had diverse and specific experiences, it quickly became clear to me that certain trends and topics were enumerated across the institution, regardless of the individual's specific work setting. Further, it quickly became apparent that these trends were present and described regardless of the participant's type of employment (faculty, staff or administrator) and regardless of the participant's particular locale (academic or administrative/support unit).

The length of time for a particular focus group has been described by Tang, Davis, Sullivan, and Fisher (1995). This study indicated that, if a focus group extends beyond 2 hours, fatigue or disinterest may set in. We determined that a 1-l/2 hour session be provided for each town hall meeting, to allow for a brief overview followed by specific questions and follow up questions.

The facilitator's style might impact the focus group. As described by Rapley (2004), the moderator might be an "interventionist", raising topics directly, calling on specific participants, cutting off lines of discussion that seem to be less productive, or challenging some participants. Another style might be one that is less interventionist – allowing a more meandering discussion. In the town hall meetings, based on numbers of participants, limits in time, and in some cases, a lack of participation, the facilitator tended to be more interventionist. Considering that this was the case, the data gathered would likely be more focused. This was particularly true after the first ten or 12 town hall meetings, when trends became more apparent, leading the moderator to cut off lengthy discussion of topics that were already well-documented.

It is beyond the scope of this article to deal with the recording, transcribing, analysis, discussion and dissemination of the results of the 54 employee town hall meetings and the two student town hall meetings. This article deals primarily with the methods used to prepare for and to conduct the actual meetings themselves and uses these town hall meetings as the focus for documenting the journey of this particular researcher in learning how to conduct focus groups.

Along the way, I learned about how focus group data is generated, about group dynamics, and about how to recognize themes as they develop in a constantly evolving

review of ongoing data generation. While I believe that the coursework, the materials and resources consulted, and the discussion with colleagues and fellow researchers was useful, nothing was as educational as was the actual conducting of the town hall/focus group meetings themselves. Although not without challenge, I believe that these focus groups were an excellent means of gathering qualitative information that provided insight into the data gleaned through online surveys.

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