

DDS focus groups guidance

1. Introduction to focus groups

A focus group is essentially a small group discussion around specific questions, moderated by a researcher (in this case, a member of your team). They allow groups to get a range of viewpoints/feedback more quickly than through interviewing multiple individuals. Participant interactions (agree, challenge, comment, expand...) are also an important source of information. Through participants' discussion with each other, there will be an opportunity for your group gain more information about your problem area (or possible areas), generate new ideas, and get preliminary feedback about your ideas from the Fast Hack.

What should your group be trying to learn from the focus group? This is an opportunity to explore questions related to your current/possible topic, and follow up on some of the things you identified in the Fast Hack. The focus group really is **about exploration rather than answers**. Depending on where your group is, you might use this opportunity to help you narrow down and choose the problem you will work on. Or, you might already be asking for feedback on some ideas generated in the Fast Hack. Some groups may be doing both exploration and feedback.

Focus groups are about *qualitative data*, rather than *quantitative (numerical) data*. This means that they are a way to ask exploratory "how" questions. They are about understanding processes, accounts, explanations, experiences, and meaning-making. They are not about producing numbers, testing relationships, or making predictions. They are interested in the individual group members, and are not treating them as a representative sample of a larger population (e.g. students). *NB: there is an immense literature on qualitative methods in psychology and elsewhere, this is an extremely simplistic explanation that is good enough for now.*

2. Creating and ordering focus group questions

An hour-long focus group is actually very little time and your group **MUST** plan and prioritise your questions ahead of time, to maximise the chance of getting the information you need. Your group should plan a **MAXIMUM** of four main questions, and be aware that you might not get to all of them.

For each question, you should prepare a few **follow-up questions or prompts**, to use to get people to give more information or elaborate on their answers. If you are stuck, a good follow-up question for almost any situation is to ask someone for a specific example or reason.

Good questions: Are asking about people's experiences, understanding, and meaning. In the Fast Hack, some DDS groups were already grappling with issues like "what does 'healthy' mean?" or "what do people think 'counts' as cooking?" "how do people make this decision?". **These are great qualitative questions** because those are not questions we can answer with numbers. The "answers" will be descriptive, and might include both overlaps and contradictions between participants.

Good questions are specific enough not to be overwhelming, but not so specific that they are leading participants to a particular answer. Remember that the goal is to explore questions in an open way, not to try to elicit specific answers. Good questions also do not imply any value judgement about what is good, important, or preferable—your participants may not care *at all* about the things that you do, and that is very valuable to find out. **TIP:** try out your questions on someone outside your DDS group, to see if they easily understand the question or think it is biased/leading.

Poor questions: Are questions that trying to produce numbers, and are mainly trying to find out how often or how much (etc.). This is not a survey, and there will be other chances for your group to collect numerical information. Please also consider carefully whether participants would feel comfortable discussing your proposed questions in a group, in front of strangers. If some members of your group say OK and others aren't sure, it is better to be conservative! Please be extra careful if you are proposing questions that have anything to do with peoples' financial situations, or may touch on health conditions, religious beliefs, or anything else potentially sensitive or embarrassing.

Order of discussion: Order your questions based on which are most important for your group's investigations, because you may run out of time—it is better to have to skip a self-important or less-central question! **Put your most important question second, not first**, unless questions “build on” each other and *must* be in a certain order. It can take the group time to “warm up” and get used to talking to each other in this unusual situation. You are likely to get better, more open discussion of the second question than the first.

1. Medium important question—use a shorter or easier-to-discuss question, if you think you have one
2. Most important question
3. Medium important question
4. Least important or central question—in case you must skip or discuss very briefly

3. Focus group recruitment

You need to recruit 4-5 people for your focus group, AFTER you have identified your goals, and have a draft of your questions. This way, you can inform people of the group topic/purpose when inviting them to participate. Your participants should be stakeholders, or people who have some kind of interest or ‘stake’ in the issue(s) you are exploring. Their ‘stake’ might be quite general: you just need students who eat! However, some groups may need to be more targeted, such as students who live at Pollock, or students who buy lunch on campus...

You SHOULD NOT have more than 5 people (even though the focus group readings provided for DDS say that focus groups may have up to 8 people). The more people you have, the less time everyone gets to talk, and the more complicated the analysis is later.

Your group needs to consider what type of participants would *best* help to explore your questions, and also what type of participants *could* (or definitely *could not*) be helpful for your questions. For example, in order to answer your questions it might be important to your group to recruit participants who say that healthy eating is important to them. Try to recruit the “best” type of participants first, if you can. These options may help you consider who is “best” for your group:

1. Participants who are **different** from each other, who will represent a range of behaviours and opinions
2. Participants who are **similar** to one another, and will share 1 or more key characteristics
3. **“Informed”** participants who already have a particular opinion/commitment about your issue
4. **“Naive”** participants who have no particular knowledge or commitments about the subject

If your group is not yet strongly committed to a problem within your sub-theme and is using the focus group in a very exploratory way, you are advised to choose a somewhat heterogeneous group of participants, and to hear from as many viewpoints as you can.

4. Group member roles

Your group needs to have a **minimum of 3 members** present for the focus group, because there are lots of things to take care of. Well before the session, you need to decide which person will play which role.

1. **Moderator:** This person poses the questions to the group, and helps to manage the discussion (for example, might invite a quiet person to contribute). S/he also helps get the group started at the beginning, transition between questions, and wrap up at the end. *NB: his role the most important for the success of the focus group, and requires preparation.*
2. **Camera/audio operator + timekeeper:** Someone needs to constantly mind the camera or audio recording equipment throughout the session, perhaps moving it if necessary to see/hear people better. This person can also help by watching the clock, and signalling the moderator as needed.
3. **Note-taker:** This person takes notes during the discussion. The goal is NOT to record everything, but to note down particularly interesting things—see section 6 on “recording the focus group”. *NB: This person probably will not need to talk during the discussion.*
4. **Optional--Note-taker 2:** They can both take general notes, or each note taker can focus on something specific.

The moderator and the note-taker **MUST** be separate people—it is too hard to do both roles at the same time. It is an option for two people to switch roles partway through: someone moderates the first two questions, someone else does the next two. Do what works for your group.

5. Focus group time line: what happens when?

For a 1-hour focus group time slot, you will have a **maximum of 40 minutes** actual discussion. If there are lots of questions at the start or you spend too long explaining the project, you may have even less time! Your group’s schedule should be similar to the following:

Minutes 0-10	<p>OPEN. Explain group purpose, consent info, sign paperwork</p> <p>You will need to say a bit about what the focus group is trying to find out (background), why it is taking place (DDS course) and what will actually happen (discussion of multiple questions. What contribution will the participants’ ideas and information make? You are advised to write a few bullet points ahead of time to make sure you cover the essential information and keep it short.</p> <p>Then, people will need to fill out and sign the consent paperwork. You must have two copies—they keep one signed copy, and DDS keeps the other. Remember that this is personal information!</p>
Minutes 10-15	<p>Group members quickly introduce themselves</p> <p>Each group member should introduce him/herself, in a way that gives some context for his/her participation. When planning this stage, think “what would it be useful for us/everyone to know about that person before we get started?” All DDS group members should also make sure to say hello and give their names, even if they do not talk afterwards.</p> <p>Do NOT do these at the same time as filling out consent paperwork.</p>

~ Minute 15	<p>Moderator poses first question to the group, reminds them about “rules”</p> <p><i>See separate document with advice and instructions for moderator</i></p>
Minutes 15-50	<p>Main body of discussion, with 2-4 questions. Figure out an internal schedule—how long does your group want to spend on each question?</p> <p><i>See separate document with advice and instructions for moderator</i></p>
Minutes 50-55	<p>Start wrapping up: Alert group that you are almost out of time, and take last comments.</p>
Minutes 50-55	<p>CLOSE. Thank participants and give reminders. Remind them of how to contact the researchers (your team) if needed, e.g. if any concerns about participation, would like to hear about results, etc.</p>

Additional tips about the schedule:

1. DO NOT skip the explanation of group purpose and the introductions, even if you are worried about running out of time in your session. These are essential for participants to know what is going on and be comfortable in the focus group. You will need to cut down your questions instead.
2. Introductions are also an important opportunity for each person to both speak, and to listen to others. They help to set the tone for the whole discussion. It may help to have name tags or cards, in addition to the spoken introductions.

6. Recording the focus group

Each DDS group will need to record their focus group in some way. You are recommended to **video-record** the group, because this captures more information about group dynamics than does audio alone. However, you are also recommended to make a **back-up audio recording** (even just from a phone or tablet) to make *absolutely sure* that there will be some record of your focus group, even if there is a video problem. Depending on your participants and the room you are in, people may not always be easy to hear everyone on the video. An extra audio recording can be useful to check what people said.

Why not just use notes? It is impossible to record everything using notes, and especially to record people’s exact words and inflections. The discussion just moves too fast. With video and/or audio, the session can be played back later as many times as needed, as a part of the discussion and analysis with your whole team. Some things that aren't helpful now may help later in your project!

The role of the written notes *during* the session is actually a first step in analysis, flagging up particularly interesting or unexpected things, new questions to investigate, emerging issues and themes. S/he might also keep track of group dynamics, big points of agreement/disagreement, things to follow up later. The note-taking is not meant to create a record of the focus group.

It is vital to test your recording equipment ahead of time, including checking that you can get files OFF the devices, in a usable format. See the check lists for more details on this.

Data management and ethics: Video files and other records of the focus group (including consent forms) will contain personal information. Your group must know where you plan to store these, and who is ultimately responsible for doing it. You are advised to back up a copy of your video files *immediately*. You may also wish to type up or make a photocopy of the notes.