

Focus Group Discussion: An Emerging Qualitative Tool for Educational Research

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ABSTRACT

Educational research is the need of the hour with the ever-changing curriculum, teaching-learning methodologies and continuous evolution of technology and resources in the global world of education. The use of quantitative and qualitative methods to generate data is vital to investigate and solve any research problem. A range of qualitative methods are available to the researcher such as case studies, in-depth interviews, participant observation etc. These methods help the researcher to explore the deep domains of complex research issues in a natural setting environment. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) is a successful and absorbing qualitative research method used to observe and record the responses, beliefs, perceptions and attitudes of the participants in a research study. It has gained immense popularity in the recent past and enables meaningful, detailed and high-quality data collection when executed in the right way. This article overviews the applications, methodology and analysis of a “Focus Group Discussion” in educational research.

Keywords: Focus groups, group interview, discussion group, qualitative tool, educational research.

INTRODUCTION

The term “Focus Group Discussion” (FGD) refers to a special group established for the purpose of discussion in a research study, comprising of a specific number of participants as deemed necessary according to the particular study.^[1] It has been documented to be an effective qualitative research tool and has found particular application in the fields of sociology and marketing. However, in the recent past, the use of Focus Group Discussion in educational research has been gaining popularity.^[2] It has been successfully used to bridge the gaps during data collection in quantitative research.^[3] Focus Group Discussion may help decipher the feelings, attitudes and reactions of participants in a particular group for a specific study or research question in mind.

FGDs involve a controlled discussion within in a small, closed group, which is carried out by a trained interviewer referred to as the “Moderator”. Through carefully crafted questions, the moderator establishes and facilitates a discussion on a particular topic within the group. Subjects are provided relevant information regarding the topic of discussion and they are made to discuss, open up and express their opinions, thus adding value to the research study. While the discussion is in progress, the Moderator or facilitator extracts some information and makes the session snowball by introducing

appropriate and relevant questions at various times, thus streamlining the discussion by bringing forward questions in the desirable sequence. This helps in arriving at new insights and inferences regarding the particular topic.

Focus Group Discussions may appear to be simple interviews where questions are asked and answers are discussed and recorded, but in actuality they require significant effort on the part of the interviewer, who must have the skill, concentration, understanding, insight, and discipline to conduct these discussions in an organized way.^[4] The moderator's ability to facilitate the group discussions is one of the key factors and drives the participants to open up and share their views without the fear of being judged. Focus groups are essential tools for qualitative research which help gain insights into the collective views of the participants and at the same time, help get a clear understanding regarding their beliefs, attitudes and perceptions. FGDs offers the participants a non-threatening and non-evaluating platform where they can express their true feelings, opinions and responses in their own words in an uninhibited way and corroborate the results of the study.^[5] When used appropriately, it can prove to be a highly qualitative discussion method, which may help reach the conclusion and results of study in question in an unbiased manner. The trusted environment encourages the participants to speak out their mind, irrespective of the fact whether the others agree or disagree, thus enabling the collection of rich, unbiased, high quality research data. Following due consent from the participants, data may be recorded by observations, notes, audio or video recording and is later analyzed by the researcher and his team.^[2]

LITERATURE SEARCH AND DATA EXTRACTION

A comprehensive review of literature was conducted using electronic bibliographic databases such as MEDLINE-PubMed, SCOPUS & Google Scholar, with the

keywords “focus group”, “focus group discussion”, “educational research”, “qualitative research methods” and “group discussion”. Peer reviewed articles in English language published until July 2024 were retrieved. Systematic meta-analyses, literature review and articles using FGD in their research study were included. Articles in English language which discussed the “methodology”, “set-up”, “benefits and limitations”, “analysis” of focus group discussions were chosen and thoroughly screened and summarized.

APPLICATIONS OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

The use of FGDs depends primarily on the purpose of the study. Its use is not just limited to obtaining feedback and understanding perceptions of participants for a research study, but has a much wider application in various areas of research for problem identification, planning, implementation, and assessment.^[6,7,8] Some of the scenarios with the possible application of FGDs is as below:

- As an independent method of research.
- To be a part of mixed methodology research study design as an adjunct to quantitative data.
- In planning stages of a research design to develop questions & surveys.
- Evaluation of new programs and procedures.
- To substantiate or challenge data collected through other methods.
- For formative and summative assessment.
- To generate hypotheses that can be further research tested using quantitative research methods.
- Brainstorm new ideas and concepts

ROLE OF FOCUS GROUPS IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Focus group Discussions have been used at various levels of educational research to fulfil objectives in planning, development, evaluation and assessment of an educational program, project, policy and curriculum etc.

It has been used in various research studies trying to understand the needs, interests and problems of students and teachers.^[9]

There is enough evidence that combining the quantitative and qualitative research methods results in strengthening of the research design. Though initially, the FGD was more often used in social sciences and marketing to understand the responses of the population and consumers for improvising the products, its use and relevance in educational research has increased manifold. They are being incorporated by researchers in different domains of educational research at different levels. Be it, in the planning stages where surveys have to be designed which are understandable and acceptable or be it a part of evaluation stage as a part of summative evaluation and feedback.^[10] They can be used for development of questionnaires, surveys and items for tests and interpreting the previous quantitative results, FGDs can also be used to study the effectiveness of various study methods in educational institutions.^[11]

SET UP AND DESIGN OF A FOCUS GROUP

To get the most from a focus group, it should have some key essential components which determine its effective execution.^[12] Each element has a significant contribution in implementation and planning.^[13] A focus group majorly consists of:

- A specific purpose and research question for discussion
- Selected participants arranged into groups
- A trained and skilled moderator
- An assistant for observation and making the records
- A comfortable spacious room with adequate seating

Purpose: It is pertinent to have a clear research question or purpose in mind so that discussions can be framed around that specific goal and desirable information can be generated.

Group Dimension: The group size should neither be too big or too small. Small groups

may lack actively speaking members and a lot of discussion points may not be taken effectively whereas a large group can have too much noise and too many people speaking and interfering with each other and may again create obstacles for a smooth discussion. An ideal group size would comprise of 6-10 group members. We can have as many groups as required.

Moderator: A skilled and trained interviewer or moderator in a focus group is instrumental like a driver who navigates the path to reach the right destination. He or she is the one who moderates and guides the discussion. He uses his skills to lead the conversations forward in the productive way by using carefully designed and selected questions and adapting a flow. Sometimes, he becomes vocal and sometimes, he just keeps quiet to allow the discussion to flow so as to achieve the intended goal.^[11]

Assistant: An assistant who accompanies the moderator is an important figure of the research team. The moderator needs to acknowledge the presence and role of the assistant in the very beginning of the focus group discussion. The assistant does not directly take part in the discussion but carefully observes and take down notes during the entire discussion and gives an oral summary if asked to and gives feedback and analysis of the discussion. Sometimes audio and videotaping of the discussions is also made for observation and making the records. This is also managed by the assistant who seeks due informed consent from the participants for the same. Any participant who is uncomfortable with the recordings should be allowed to leave if they wish so.

Venue: The room or location where the focus group discussion has to take place should be quiet, comfortable, private, accessible and free from distractions. The aim is to seek maximum attendance and constructive discussions in the group.

METHODOLOGY OF A FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION^[1]

After having the key requirements of a focus group in place, it's the responsibility of the "moderator" to introduce the topic, acknowledge the presence of the assistant and brief his role and also let the participants know if they are just being observed for the discussions or are being audio recorded or videotaped. A due consent has to be taken for the same and any candidate who objects to it should be allowed to exit the group.^[14]

Moderator has to follow a pattern to opening, leading and closing of the discussions in the group as per follows:

- (1) Welcome all the participants and greet the fellow colleagues and assistants.
- (2) Introduce fellow colleagues and assistant/observers to the group.
- (3) Inform about the audio recordings or video tapings if any (take consent).
- (4) Brief the audience about the topic of discussion in a specific way.
- (5) Set up the basic rules and discipline to be followed during the discussion.
- (6) Begin the talk with the first introductory question and lead on further with carefully designed questions.

It is important to mention here that first question of the discussion is the beginning question which grips the attention of all the participants. It kind of triggers them into speaking out and once the participants start speaking, they lose their inhibitions and talk easily again. Some icebreaking in the form of introductions and informal questions or a fun activity can make them know each other and become comfortable and relaxed.^[15,16]

FLOW OF DISCUSSION IN A FOCUS GROUP

After the introductory question, the further flow of discussion is carried out by using the guide prepared by the moderator which contains carefully designed questions. Every question being discussed has a purpose and the right sequence should be followed for generating meaningful outcome from the discussions. Questions should be asked in a

direct, simple, clear, jargon free and conversational manner. There can be both open ended and closed ended questions. Differences in language between the moderator and the audience if any should be taken care and questions should be designed accordingly. Sufficient time should be devoted to creating quality questions.

Broadly, we design the questions under five types of categories^[16,17,18]

- **Opening**
- **Introductory**
- **Transition**
- **Key**
- **Ending**
- **Opening question:** They are basically a couple of informal questions which act as icebreakers and make all members of the group familiar to each other. Simple questions are asked to which everyone quickly responds and the group starts interacting. These questions are generally not analyzed.
- **Introductory questions:** They are intended to introduce the topic of discussion in the focus group and seek the general understanding and views of the participants towards the topic. They are given an opportunity to understand the purpose of the discussion. However, these questions are not very relevant for analysis.
- **Transition questions:** These are important questions which lead from the introduction to the key area of discussion. These questions give a broader perspective to the students about the topic and also give them an overview of understanding of the views of fellow participants regarding the topic of discussion.
- **Key questions:** These are the core questions which have been thoughtfully designed by the moderator and the research team and are analyzed carefully to bring out the inferences of the discussions. Maximum time should be given for these questions and the moderator should not rush through them.

- **Ending/ Closure questions:** These are again critical questions for the analysis and bring the discussion to the closure. The moderator generally summarizes the discussion and takes one last consideration and revisits the views of the participants to ensure that they still stand with what they expressed or if they have any second thoughts on their views. The candidates are asked about the adequacy of the summary. A final question is asked to the candidates seeking their views if anything was missed during the discussions. ^[19]

ANALYSING FOCUS GROUP DATA

[1,8,20]

The unique nature of interactive group discussions and dynamics of a focus group are kept in mind while doing the analysis. The entire observations which are noted down and audio recorded or videotaped are transcribed first to have all data at one place before starting its interpretation. ^[21]

Certain rules have been advocated by various researchers to analyze the data of the FGDs. A systematic gathering of data which comprises of audio-video recordings and notes of the entire discussion, additional notes taken by the moderator and the assistant moderator are of highest value during analysis. This leads way for coding of the data taken during the interview. ^[16,22]

An individual summary of every participant can be made on the critical questions to understand the intent of each participant. A debriefing session between the moderator and assistant can give the first overview of the discussion of a particular group and identify any gross differences or similarities with other groups. The research summary can be shared with other members of the research team for a review and also sometimes with the original participant group. This is generally done to verify the analysis and avoid any bias or selective perception about the available information by just the moderator and assistant. The analysis must be practical and have an appropriate level of interpretation. Another

important parameter to be taken into account for analysis is timely interpretation of the collected data. Though the discussions are audio recorded and videotaped and can be revisited a number of times but other inputs like mood of discussion and nonverbal cues can be forgotten by researchers over a period of time and this may affect the quality of the analysis. ^[23]

Various approaches are used to analyze the qualitative research data, inductive theme approach being one of the most common. In this method, the data is first transcribed and given to two researchers for open coding to extract thematic constructs for discussion. This step familiarizes the researcher with the raw data and helps them to build the themes and subthemes. Both the researchers review all the themes and reach on an agreement wherever a difference in coding is found. ^[24]

The results of the data are reported and communicated to the audience if the discussions were for a specific need or problem. It also helps the researcher develop a logical description of the investigation and record the findings. Reporting can be either oral, written or a combination of both depending on the purpose of the study. ^[25,26]

In the end, besides giving the new information of the focus group discussions, the analysis should broaden the level of understanding of the researchers and participants in terms of the design of the study, selection of the participants, formulation of the questions and conduction of the study.

BENEFITS OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS ^[23,24,27]

- It is easier to conduct a focus group discussion.
- It helps to collect rich data at lesser cost as compared to other methods.
- It permits the researcher to explore various topics and help generate a hypothesis.

- Data can be quickly processed and analyzed at the end of the group discussion.
- Since there is a direct interaction between the researcher and respondents, it helps the researcher to clarify the responses.
- Open responses of the respondents in their own words helps generate rich and large data.
- Participants get a chance to revisit their own thoughts and understandings and gives them clarity and insight about the topic of discussion.

CHALLENGES IN CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION [27,28,29]

- It is not based on a natural atmosphere in a way that you plan a set up to meet and gather all the participants. It may elicit some hesitation and anxiety in the minds of respondents.
- Skilled and trained and most importantly well-prepared moderators are required. Deficiency in this aspect can hugely interfere with the desired outcome.
- It is time consuming in terms of pre-preparations and designing of the questions.
- Logistics of conducting and analyzing the focus group requires a lot of expertise and effort.^[30]
- Delay in interpretation of the data can affect the quality of the result.

CONCLUSION

Focus group discussion is a powerful qualitative research tool to understand the perceptions and attitudes of the participants in various problems encountered in educational research. The emphasis is purely on the topic and obtaining the qualitative data. The method can be explored as standalone or in combination with the quantitative research methodology. When used in the mixed approach, it is a meaningful adjunct to the quantitative research methods and thus helps to bridge the gaps. The foundation and successful implementation of this method lies in

careful planning, selection of participants, designing of questions, conduction of the interview and analysis of the data. When used effectively, it can generate valuable information accounting and crediting views and emotions that cannot be recorded with other data collection methods.

Declaration by Authors

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