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Good Intentions, Muddled Methods: Focus on Focus Groups

Abstract

Are focus groups abused, misused, or overused in Extension? We responded to the challenge of getting Extension focused on the art and science of high-quality focus groups through an educational project. This article describes contemporary challenges of focus group practice and presents the first phase of an educational initiative, which includes a series of educational briefs.

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Introduction

Focus groups are often employed in program planning and community development. However, familiarity has been accompanied by uses of focus groups that appear to be inappropriate, incorrect, or excessive.

This critique arises from our practice as campus faculty and staff with Extension appointments in sociology and agricultural education. Each of us conducts focus groups and teaches focus group methodology. We found ourselves bewildered by the wide range of quality in focus group practice in Extension. Our response was an educational project. This article:

1. Discuss contemporary challenges of focus group practice; and

2. Describe the first phase of an educational initiative--a series of methodology briefs.

Problems and Challenges

Focus groups were once innovative. Contemporary professionals and their clients, however, are well acquainted with focus groups. Many have participated in focus groups, served as moderators, or hired focus group experts. Familiarity is a sign of methodological maturity. It has not changed the value of focus groups, but familiarity may have changed the climate for usage (Archer, 1993; Gamon, 1992).

Focus groups are a form of qualitative research. Krueger and Casey (2000) define a focus group as "a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment" (p. 5). Focus groups can be used to collect information as part of a needs assessment (before a program begins) or to evaluate a current program (after it has begun).

There are many examples of successful focus groups in Extension; many staff members are to be commended. *Journal of Extension* articles describe applications of focus groups to needs assessment (Duncan & Marotz-Baden, 1999; Malek, 2002); evaluation (Nordstrom, Wilson, Kelsey, Marezki, & Pitts, 2000); program marketing (Archer, 1993; Duncan & Marotz-Baden, 1999); and youth perceptions of agriculture (Holz-Clause & Jost, 1995). Less attention, however, is paid to the art and science of focus groups (Archer, 1993; Gamon, 1992). Extension needs to address issues of focus group methodology.

Evidence

We arrived at our conclusion through interactions with Extension professionals, community partners, colleagues in non-profit associations and industry, and graduate students. Our observations were complementary. Grudens-Schuck asked adult returning students in a graduate Extension evaluation course in 2002 if they wanted to devote several weeks to focus groups. The students responded enthusiastically. Many had been placed into focus groups as moderators, transcribers, or analysts with no prior training. They did not want to "fake it" any longer.

Similarly, Extension staff sometimes find themselves involved in focus groups as designers and/or moderators without having received proper training. Allen responded to a request to do a 1-day focus group training to help professional staff deliver a new program. Staff insisted that they needed "just the basics," but likely needed more. Larson has received more than one request to conduct a single focus group to predict voter response on a bond issue. A single focus group can't do this. Our examples are reflected in a recent interview of focus group expert Richard Krueger:

Focus groups look easy, but they are hard to do. Too often people do focus groups without adequate preparation, training or thought and consequently the results can be flawed. They then blame focus groups, but it is really because it hasn't been done well (Grudens-Schuck, 2003, p. 2).

Improvement

The challenge was on our doorstep. We decided to address collectively issues of quality in focus groups. Reasons for improving practice included:

1. Eliminating waste of precious resources on inquiry that was poorly managed, and
2. Avoiding damages and delay that accrue as a result of inquiries that produce misleading information.

We committed to writing a series of briefs to clarify issues related to focus group practice. Our first two focus group briefs are completed, available in print and on the Web. The learner can move back and forth between briefs to control the amount of information provided. The publications are not the only form of education that will be used. Admittedly, it is not the most effective, but short briefs enhance the value of training and are important in the transfer of learning (Caffarella, 2002). Writing the briefs together also has helped to shape ideas about training.

Brief #1: Can You Call It a Focus Group?

The first brief <<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/PM1969A.pdf>> builds the case among professionals for paying attention to the issue of quality. The brief suggests damage that may result from poor-quality information, including erosion of credibility of educators. We included examples of inappropriate practice, such as using focus groups to:

1. Assess pre-post content knowledge gains,
2. Bring a group to consensus, or
3. Develop allegiance for a particular idea through persuasion.

The brief contains a table to distinguish focus groups from other types of group discussions (such as town meetings or strategic planning). The brief also provides a list of questions to use with clients to clarify whether focus group methodology is the best choice for the task at hand.

Brief #2: Focus Group Fundamentals

The second brief <<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/PM1969B.pdf>> summarizes key concepts of focus group methodology. For some, fundamentals are unnecessary; for others, they are essential. The brief emphasizes duties of the moderator. It suggests outright that educators may not want to place themselves in this role without training or support.

The piece also educates about the composition of the group because local practice tends to mix freely people with different levels of power who know each other (making open discussion difficult) or invite everyone (thereby biasing the conversation toward people with an activist orientation). There are legitimate processes that convene mixed groups (such as action research or strategic planning), but these choices bring the activity outside the realm of focus group methodology.

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