**Tutor Notes**

* **Purpose:** This activity gives a demonstration of a focus group. It illustrates how focus groups can be used for gathering data and highlights the role of the moderator, showing how they can control or overcome digressions, dominant speakers, breakaway conversations and disruptions. It also illustrates how to record a focus group.
* **Type:** Focus group (in class), followed by a class discussion.
* **Level:** Beginner, intermediate and advanced (the level will be reflected in the complexity of discussion).
* **Duration:** Thirty to 40 minutes for the focus group, followed by 20 to 30 minutes for the discussion.
* **Equipment/materials:** A room that is suitable for a focus group. Audio-recording equipment (of good quality and poor quality; see below).
* **Prerequisite activities:** None.
* **Learning outcome:** By the end of this activity students will understand how focus groups are used to gather data, understand the role of the moderator and know how to record a focus group.

## The activity

This is a practical activity that requires you to run a focus group with your students. The topic can be of your choosing: in the past this activity has been carried out towards the end of the course, so that students can discuss their experiences on the course so far. You will be the moderator so it is advisable only to attempt this activity if you have some experience of running focus groups. When this activity was first trialled, roles were assigned to all students, including the role of moderator. However, the activity failed because the moderator had no experience and did not know how to run the group or control or overcome the problems that had been introduced. If you do not have experience of running a focus group, you can find a suitable focus group demonstration online to show to your students and use as a basis for discussion.

The ideal number of participants for a focus group is 9–11. If you have many more students you can ask that some observe the focus group. It is possible to run a focus group with as few as five students, but any fewer than that number will not provide a good demonstration of the focus group method.

Choose a suitable venue if possible and arrange the furniture appropriately. Try to ensure that there will be no disturbances or distractions. If this is not possible, discuss these issues at the end of the focus group, asking students to comment on how they were disturbed and/or distracted and what they would do to ensure that this did not happen in their own focus groups.

When your students arrive, take four of them aside. Assign one of the roles listed in the student handout to each student (these should be printed and divided, with one role given to each student so that they can refer to their role as the discussion progresses). Ask the students not to reveal their role to others in the group.

Run the focus group with your students for 30–40 minutes (the time will depend on how much students want to say and the time that you have available for your class: you can discuss ideal lengths later with your students). Record the discussion so that you can demonstrate recording techniques.

## Key issues

The following points will help to provide a useful and interesting demonstration of the focus group method and give examples of issues that can be covered during the class discussion:

1. Focus group: introduce yourself, explain why you are holding the discussion and tell participants what will happen to the results. Discussion: highlight the importance of a good introduction. Describe how you would negotiate a length of time for the focus group if you were not constrained by class time.
2. Focus group: discuss recording techniques and describe how data from the focus group will be used, stored and protected. Discussion: play back some of the recording so that you can demonstrate the importance of using a good recorder (if appropriate, you can also use a poor-quality recorder to demonstrate how bad a recording can be and the associated difficulties with transcription and analysis). Demonstrate via the recording how, in most cases, participants tend to speak quietly at the beginning but more loudly as the discussion progresses and they become more confident. Discuss issues of data protection, storage and security.
3. Focus group: assure participants about anonymity and confidentiality, asking that they respect this and don’t pass on what has been said in the group to third parties. Discussion: highlight the importance of anonymity, confidentiality and data protection (see [Activities 66](ms-local-stream://EpubReader_8A308081608D4FACA2EE48561D39AFC2/Content/text/part0044_split_120.html#s9781473984219.i2377), [76](ms-local-stream://EpubReader_8A308081608D4FACA2EE48561D39AFC2/Content/text/part0046_split_000.html#s9781473984219.i2606) and [79](ms-local-stream://EpubReader_8A308081608D4FACA2EE48561D39AFC2/Content/text/part0046_split_024.html#s9781473984219.i2682)).
4. Focus group: demonstrate how to negotiate a code of behaviour with your participants (students tend to raise issues such as dominance, aggression, abuse, not listening, and interrupting). Ask the participants to respect each other. Only one person should speak at a time, they should not interrupt each other, no one person should dominate and all opinions should be seen as valid, even if others might not agree with them. Discussion: ask students how they felt about this code being broken by some of the students in the group. Also, ask the role-playing students how they felt about breaking this code and not respecting other members of the group.
5. Focus group: begin with general, easy questions to help your students relax. Demonstrate how silences can be used positively. Show how you use your interview schedule and probe for detail. Discussion: ask if students noticed the type, structure and order of questions (see [Activity 39: Producing an interview schedule](ms-local-stream://EpubReader_8A308081608D4FACA2EE48561D39AFC2/Content/text/part0043_split_048.html#s9781473984219.i1770)). Did they notice how silences were used constructively? Did they notice how participants were probed for more information?
6. Focus group: control and/or overcome the problems that are introduced by the role-playing students (do not make eye contact with the dominant student, gently steer the digressions back to the topic, ask students to rejoin the discussion if they are having a breakaway conversation, for example). Discussion: ask if students noticed the roles that their peers had been asked to play and/or if they noticed the tactics used by the moderator to control or overcome the problems. If students were unable or unwilling to play their role, ask why (some students do not want to break the negotiated code of behaviour, for example).
7. Focus group: wind down, thank the participants for taking part and demonstrate how to leave a contact name and number. Discussion: conclude the discussion with important issues that have not been covered, which are of relevance to your group and their level of study. This could include information about finding and recruiting participants or issues such as the interrelationship between the focus group method, methodological standpoint and theoretical perspective, for example.

# Useful terms

A ‘focus group’ is a collection of interacting individuals, with common characteristics or interests, holding a discussion that is introduced and led by a ‘moderator’. This person ensures that the discussion stays on topic and controls breakaway conversations, dominance and disruption. The aim of a focus group is not to reach a consensus, but to gain a greater understanding of attitudes, opinions, beliefs, behaviour and perceptions (with the focus on interaction as part of the research data).

Focus groups can be used as a research method by researchers approaching their work from different epistemological and methodological standpoints, although care must be taken to ensure compatibility of method with underlying standpoint. They can be used in an exploratory way to help inform a questionnaire, or they can be used towards the end of a project to help explain emerging themes, for example. In some projects, researchers use focus groups as the only data collection method. Participants are chosen from the study population, using a variety of sampling techniques (depending on methodology).