

Focus Groups and User Panels

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Focus groups and user panels bring together small groups of people to discuss specific topics, usually as part of a facilitated conversation. A focus group generally consists of people with some common thread between them for a session, which could be about an aspect of museum practice, or an output, such as an exhibition, display, object, or piece of text. The participants could be current or potential museum visitors or part of a particular group you have contact with. A user panel usually consists of multiple sessions, made up of a group people from the target audience you are aiming at. User panels require more commitment from the participants as they are held over a longer period of time, meeting frequently and regularly.

As these are flexible, qualitative methods, both user panels and focus groups can generate a lot of data. The time it will take to analyse this should be considered before deciding whether they are an appropriate evaluation method for you to use. The depth of investigation and interrogation that both focus groups and user panels afford give a rare opportunity to delve deeper into people's motivations, thoughts, and emotions. They are a good way to find out the opinions of specific audiences and (unlike a questionnaire) give the opportunity to ask additional questions and clarify responses. Both techniques require a skilled facilitator.

How to do it

- Plan.

The more time you can commit to planning, the better your results will be. Carefully think through everything that will be needed for successful sessions. Who will facilitate? Do you have someone internally who has the skill set to do this, or do you need to bring in someone else, such as a freelance facilitator? Think about the number of sessions you will need and the location where you will hold them; if you don't already have a budget allocated for this work, you might need to think about getting some funding for your project.

Consider how you will recruit the participants and how the people that you include are representative of the audience(s) you are interested in. How many people would you like to talk to? Focus groups work best when you have between 6 and 12 people. What sampling strategy will you use to recruit your participants? Ideally there will be some common ground between them; they could all be users or non-users of your venue or programme, or a mixture if there is another link between them. If you will be compensating people for their time or paying travel expenses, get payment processes and paperwork organised before you recruit. Remember that not everyone has a bank account, and some people find paperwork and forms both difficult and stressful.

Plan the session(s). Work out a timetable for each session, with key questions and a list of discussion points. Allow space in your schedule for things not to plan! Also allow time for people to get to know each other, especially if you are planning a user group that will go on for several months. How will you collect feedback from everyone, including people who might be less confident in speaking out in a group? You could ask participants to make notes during the session that you collect at the end. What will happen if not everyone in the group has strong literacy skills? Think about ways to break up the time to keep energy levels high. Refreshments are always welcome, or a

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comfort break if the sessions are online. What strategies will the facilitator use to prevent one or two voices from dominating discussions? Pilot the questions you are planning to ask.

Select your venue. Will the user group meet in the same place each week? Will the group work best in a neutral venue or in your museum? Would an online group be better for the research you are doing? The venue needs to be easy to get to and accessible for your participants. Plan for the main content of your session to last an hour or two but allow time at the beginning and end to help participants to arrive and settle in. Try to make an end point to the session; participants sometimes want to stay and chat, but the facilitators should try to avoid this if possible. If you are evaluating an exhibition, work out which specific area of the display you are evaluating for each session. You need to try to focus discussions on that limited area and allow the group time to see it and reflect.

- Recruit.

Your careful planning should help your recruitment to be more straightforward. You might need to recruit more people than you want to come in case there are some dropouts. Send out participant information sheets, consent forms, payment information, and details about where your session(s) will be held. Recruitment can be time consuming and difficult: allow plenty of time for this step.

You might choose to have a general call out and ask participants to apply to be part of the group. If you do this, decide in advance what your selection criteria will be and how the application process will work. The application method you use needs to be ethical, equitable, accessible, and appropriate to the audience you intend to work with. Tell participants in your promotional materials what the level of commitment will be: how many sessions will you expect people to attend and for how long? You could ask the participants to commit to a particular length of time, for example quarterly meetings for a calendar year, or one meeting a term for an academic year. This allows all parties to have an opportunity to reassess how things are going and their involvement. Plan the data, opinions, or information that you need to collect from applicants at the recruitment stage, but don't ask for too much. How will you store people's data securely? If you are delivering user groups over a long period of time, spend some time planning what your procedure will be for people that drop out.



Figure 1: a user group of students

- Deliver the focus group or user sessions.

Put into place all the planning when delivering the session(s). Your well-briefed facilitator will lead the discussions, using the pre-arranged prompts, questions, or objects. If other staff members will attend the session(s), brief them on what their role will be. Anyone who was directly involved in

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whatever you are discussing should have a very clear idea of what they are to say or contribute: for example, if the exhibition curator attends, they should be told what their role in the group is and how much they should talk. Be prepared to stop a member of staff if necessary. It might also be preferable to not invite people closely involved in whatever are evaluating to the focus group.

Decide how you will collect data from the focus group or panel. Recording them would give you a lot of data to transcribe and analyse. Another member of staff might be used as a note taker. They may find it helpful to create a diagram of who is in which position around the table or room. If participants make written notes or take part in an activity, gather these, and take photographs of any outputs. You could ask participants or facilitators to reflect on their experiences afterwards through a survey or reflective journal. Once the participants have left, the facilitator and other staff members present should take half an hour to debrief and discuss how the session went. Take notes or record this section, as this can be very valuable information.

- Think about how to end well.

As focus and user groups are about creating trusting relationships, you should put some thought into how you will end the session(s), so that you leave things on a good footing with the participants or the communities they represent. You might want to do some follow up analysis with your groups, either through surveys or reflective journaling. If you have involved groups in exhibition evaluation, they should be thanked appropriately in text, publications, or within the display space.

How to analyse the data

Both focus groups and user groups will generally result in qualitative data, which can be very time-consuming to analyse. The method of data analysis you chose should work with the data you have collected. For example, you might ask participants to fill in a survey as part of the session, as well as the open-ended questions for discussion. These will need different approaches for the analysis. If you have recorded the session, don't expect to be able to produce full, in-depth, reports detailing every aspect of what happened in the group. You might not be able to produce a full transcript. It is often better to analyse the conversations in a broader way, looking for recurring themes or emotions from participants, any conclusions that are drawn, or recommendations that come from the group. Your report could be a general summary of the session or sessions, outlining the topics covered, rather than a comprehensive analysis of every aspect of the conversation. Acknowledge in your final report any difficulties you faced with recruitment and any biases that may have been introduced from the participants. Remember to include the reflections of the facilitators.

Ethics, safety, and security

As with most evaluation, good planning is crucial so that everything is handled ethically and safely. Your organisation or the venue you are working with might require you to submit an ethics application, so check well in advance. Participant information sheets and consent forms should be clear and honest on the level of commitment required and when the group will end or be reviewed. As with all evaluation methods, participants should be made aware of what will happen with the information they provide as well as how and when they can withdraw from the evaluation. It can be hard to maintain confidentiality with focus groups, so have a plan for how you will keep information about participants, and who contributed specific comments, secure or if you will attribute them. As discussions continue, people in the group might say more than they wish to, but it can be harder for them to revoke consent in a group situation, so plan how you might handle an approach from a participant. If you have time, and it is an important part of your research, you might be able to check top level conclusions with the group participants at the end of the session.

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Carefully consider how to keep all participants and staff safe, both in terms of discussion topics, and the venue you use. There should never be need for two people to be alone, whether this is two participants, or a participant and a facilitator. Write a risk assessment and abide by the venue's ethics procedure. Special consideration should be given if focus or user groups are to be carried out with children, young people, or vulnerable adults, and this will require careful planning and additional risk assessment.

Cautions and caveats

It is possible to run your own focus groups, but hard. As an evaluation method, they are strongly dependent on the skills and communication style of the facilitator. If you are running the group, you might need to develop your skills as a facilitator and interviewer first. You could try to join a focus group as a participant before leading them: this can be helpful for you to see how it works, what you think goes well and how you might improve when you are leading. You should not facilitate for a focus group or user panel on anything you've been involved with. Any staff member attending sessions should be fully briefed to know what their role is, and when they should contribute. The facilitator needs to know how to handle the personalities that attend, any inherent power dynamics or previous friendships. Groups that have prominent community leaders may lead other participants to defer to them and their opinions. When you are balancing the range of participants that you would like to attend, try to avoid potential clashes that may disrupt the discussions.

Both user and focus groups require strong, usually verbal, communication skills from the participants, so they may not be suitable for all audiences that you are working with. The facilitator will need to be aware that these methods can sometimes lead to 'groupthink': when everyone reaches a conclusion, but it may not be well thought through. If a user group is meeting over a long period of time, it might become a bit of an 'echo chamber' or it can get stale. Focus and user groups use small numbers of people; beware of making sweeping generalisations based on the results of your discussions. They work well when you use them alongside other evaluation methods.

Further reading and other resources

- David L. Morgan, *The Focus Group Guidebook*, SAGE Publications, 1998; Richard A. Krueger, *Analyzing and Reporting Focus Group Results*, SAGE Publications, 1997.

These two short books, both SAGE publications, give a broad but practical overview of how to do focus groups and analyse the results. Sections on technology are showing their age, but there is still plenty of helpful information, with little focus on focus groups for marketing (which texts often assume as the primary purpose). Morgan's text is supported by frequent case studies. Krueger's chapter on 'Advice for First-Timers' and Morgan's on 'Ethical Issues' are both valuable reading.

- Emily Dawson, 'Reimagining Publics and (Non) Participation: Exploring Exclusion from Science Communication through the Experiences of Low-Income, Minority Ethnic Groups.', *Public Understanding of Science*, 27.7, 2018, pp. 772-786.

An enlightening paper which uses focus groups, interviews and accompanied visits to look at how specific audiences use (or don't use) science centres. Dawson uses quotes from group members throughout, talking sensitively about the audiences she works with for her focus groups.

- Damian Tissier and Samir Singh Nathoo, *Black and Minority Ethnic Engagement with London's museums*, Strategic Urban Futures, 2004.

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A downloadable summative report of some research in London with non-visitors from black and minority ethnic communities, through street surveys and focus groups. The conclusions of the report are interesting, the section on focus groups gives some basic information about how they were held, but there is no detail on the questions that were used to generate discussion, and it is very narrative-heavy.

- Caroline Reed, *Running a Revisiting Collections focus group*. Museums, Libraries and Archives Council and The Collections Trust (no date).

A thorough and thoughtful (downloadable) resource, originally developed for a series of focus groups getting information about museum and archive collections from communities. There are sections on practicalities of running focus groups, how to collect information and running the session. There are several suggested ways of working with the collections and how to gather responses from the participants. There are suggested forms for adapting to your situation and even ideas for the structure of the session.