

# Engaging Students through Focus Groups Methodology

Experiential Learning Activity (ELA)

Guide for Instructors

The Undergraduate Experiential Learning Project

## ELA Overview

In this activity students use focus group methodology to conduct research on a topic of current interest to them, such as social media and conflict, tensions on campus, or a controversial social issue. Working collaboratively in small groups, they design and run a focus group with fellow students as participants. The data collected are interpreted by the students and the results presented to their instructor and classmates.

As a qualitative research methodology, focus groups date back to the 1930s, when they began to be used by the military, industry, literacy activists, market researchers, health professionals, and social scientists to gather data through a focused discussion. Focus groups are especially useful in the conflict field, as they offer researchers a relatively open-ended opportunity to learn about participants' perspectives on virtually any topic. This exercise teaches focus group methodology through readings, class discussion, a mock focus group, and practicing on one another and on another group of student participants. Students experience all aspects of a complete research process from design through data collection and analysis to final presentation of results and recommendations. Students hone their skills in inquiry, teamwork, facilitation, data analysis, creativity, and oral and audiovisual presentation. Additional benefits accrue to those students who serve as focus group participants, such as a better understanding of research aims and processes.

This exercise should encourage students to draw on previous coursework, particularly in research methods. It provides a student-driven opportunity to conduct original research in order to illuminate a real world problem and to propose recommendations for addressing the problem and for future research.

The development of each ELA represents the collective effort of faculty and project staff of the Undergraduate Experiential Learning Project (UELP) at George Mason University's School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution. The idea for Engaging Students through Focus Group Methodology came from Andria Wisler. The activity was authored by Susan F. Hirsch and further developed by Joan Coolidge, Ned Lazarus, Gina Cerasani, and Julie Minde. ■

# Learning Outcomes

This Experiential Learning Activity has been designed to help students:

- Appreciate the uses and limitations of focus groups for research
- Develop research questions based on scholarly literature
- Understand informed consent and research ethics generally
- Engage in research design, data collection, and data analysis
- Organize and facilitate a group discussion
- Apply theory and research findings to real world problems
- Present research findings orally and audiovisually
- Collaborate with fellow students

This activity requires approximately 5.5 hours, although the time required depends on the number of focus group teams. The activity is designed to be run over multiple class meetings with preparatory stages in between (e.g., to develop focus group questions). ■

## Resources Required

- Student Materials packet for each student
- Dry erase board and markers

## Optional Resources

- Audiorecorders for students to tape their focus group sessions

# Instructions for Activity

## Before starting the activity

- Read through the “Focus Group Instructions” handout in the Student Materials and adjust the timeline to suit your syllabus. Ensure that students provide informed consent to participate, if required by your institution’s policies.
- Develop a matrix that organizes the logistics of the activity. You’ll want to determine:
  - o Who will be in each focus group team and in each participant group.
  - o Which focus group teams will meet with which participant groups.
  - o Where and when they will meet.
  - o Who will serve as outside observers. (You may want to ask one or two colleagues to observe each of the focus groups. This is not a necessity but helpful for providing feedback on the focus group sessions, as well as helping your evaluation of learning achieved during the exercise.) ■



*Students running an experiential learning exercise*

# Introduction to Focus Group Methodology

Start this part by introducing the topic of focus groups and the activity by using the handouts “What is a Focus Group?” and “Focus Group Instructions” found in the Student Materials (20 minutes). First, discuss “What is a Focus Group?” which offers some simple guidance on the nature of a focus group, what it can be used for, and some preliminary tips on what a good focus group environment entails. Next, discuss social media (or another topic of your choice) as a possible area of research for a focus group study. Encourage the students to generate issues related to the topic to get them thinking about some possible research questions tied to this topic.

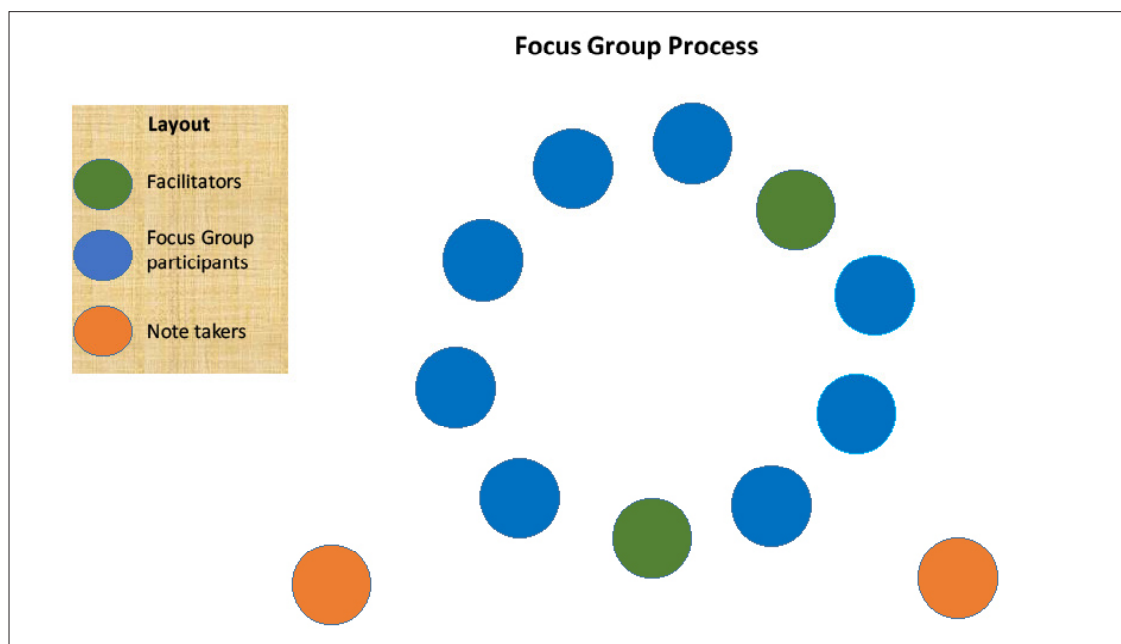
Discuss the student handout “Focus Group Instructions.”

Next, you’ll need to arrange students in groups of 4-6, depending on class size. The groups can develop their own focus group topics or you can assign a topic to each group. If the student groups are to develop their own topics, they may need to work on this outside the classroom. Group members can exchange contact information, so that they can work together outside of class (10-20 minutes).

Explain to the students that before the next class period they should read about their topic. You could 1) assign readings (e.g., from the suggested reading list from the “Resources” section below), or 2) direct the students to conduct their own research. You might want to require that each group identifies at least one publication related to their research topic.

Next, discuss the student handout “Focus Group Best Practices.” This document is an excellent, concise piece that provides some basic tips on how to run good focus groups, (15 minutes)

It works well to conduct a “mock” focus group with the students. You serve as the facilitator and stop periodically to emphasize focus group best practices.



**The following script provides a model for conducting a focus group and also allows you as an instructor to learn more about your students' experiences of classroom learning.**

Thank you for participating in this 20 minute focus group. Our conversation today has two purposes. First, you are here as a student to participate in a small group discussion with other students about your participation in experiential learning in your classes. Second, you are here as a student to experience being in a focus group as part of your preparation for convening a focus group with other students in the near future. I have several questions to guide our conversation about experiential learning and appreciate your honest responses. Your responses to these questions have no effect on your grade, and your name will not be associated with your responses in any way. You are welcome to ask for clarification of a question if needed. I will also interrupt the focus group process by saying "Time Out." In the Time Out period I'll make comments about focus group best practices and choices that you might face in conducting a focus group.

1. Have you taken part in any experiential learning activities? Follow up with these questions: What were these activities? What did you understand as their objectives?

2. How do experiential learning exercises compare to other kinds of classroom learning?

[EXAMPLE TIME OUT: You might remind the students that, as a facilitator, you are trying to be sure that everyone speaks and feels included. Discuss with them how you handled responses to the first questions. It is often the case that the initial question is met with silence.]

3. As you remember back on the experiential learning in which you participated, what moments of the experience in class were the most compelling for you?

4. Do you understand course material better or differently after participating in an experiential exercise?

5. Has your participation in experiential learning exercises affected how you approach your work, studies, or daily life? If so, how?

6. If time allows: What kind of experiential exercises would you recommend for students?

After you finish the model focus group, engage the class in a short de-brief to assess what was learned and to discuss the focus group process.

The next step is to have your students develop the sequenced questions that they will use to conduct their focus group. It is important to convey to the students that they should try to find a balance. On the one hand, planning the questions is a very important part of the research. If questions are not properly developed and sequenced, the focus group might not generate the type and quality of data desired. On the other hand, if focus group researchers treat their questions as a rigid script and neglect to listen to the participants and adapt the questions accordingly, they might lose the group's attention or constrain the direction of the conversation, thereby losing important information and insight (20 minutes).

### Strategies for Focus Group Questions

- Choose among alternatives
- Make a list
- Fill in the blank
- Rate with blank card
- Semantic differential
- Projection, fantasy and daydreams
- Draw a picture
- Develop a campaign
- Role playing
- Questions that foster ownership

What can you do...?

*From: "Designing and Conducting Focus Group Interviews" by Richard A. Krueger.*  
[www.eiu.edu/ihec/Krueger-FocusGroupInterviews.pdf](http://www.eiu.edu/ihec/Krueger-FocusGroupInterviews.pdf)

Students also must determine who will play each role (moderator/facilitator, note-taker/recorder, coordinator, time-keeper, etc.) (5 minutes).

Lastly, it is helpful to have the students rehearse conducting a focus group. One way to do this is to have teams pair up and switch off with each other, each one taking 10-15 minutes to conduct their focus group process with the other team as focus group participants (20-30 minutes). Short de-briefs after each focus group practice will help the students learn best practices.

The student teams should complete the following tasks outside of class: finalize their research aim (short paragraph) and their sequenced questions (approximately 6-8) and submit them for review per your guidance (e.g., email). They should carry out any final preparations in order to conduct their focus group and incorporate any comments you might offer into their final questions. ■



# Conducting the Focus Group and Analyzing the Data

Using your logistics matrix (discussed above), ensure that the students get to the right place with their group, observers, and participants. Once in place, the students then conduct the focus groups. Most focus groups should take about 30 to 40 minutes. (up to an 1 hour)

When the time is up, have the students return to their own classroom. Then, have the students conduct internal debriefs in their groups (and observers, if present). They should be prompted to discuss what went well, what could have gone better, their preliminary assessment of the data and its significance, and any other relevant issues. (15 minutes)

Then, bring the class back together to hold a class debrief. Have groups share with each other some of the highlights from their internal debriefs. This is often a good opportunity for the observers to provide additional observations and insights. (15 minutes)

At the end of the same class or on a different day, use the handout titled “Data Analysis Activity,” to guide the students through preliminary data analysis. You’ll want to let them know what final products are expected, as this will determine how they approach the data. Direct the students back to their original research questions to see what they were able to answer and what was not answered. Also, have them determine what they learned that was not anticipated in their original questions. For example, by allowing the conversation to stray a little from the exact questions, did any useful insights arise? (5-10 minutes)

Students can work outside class or in class toward completing the assignments. Based on their focus group results, each team should develop an audiovisual presentation that describes the following: 1) the research objective, 2) the group process, 3) the research aim and questions, 4) the findings, and 5) any recommendations or ideas for future research. You may want to review each team’s materials prior to the presentation described below. PowerPoint or Prezi work well.

As an additional assignment, students can individually submit a short paper that describes their role in the focus group activity, their reactions to the focus group process, and any changes they would make were they to run it again. ■

# Presenting the Results

Each student team presents to the class and responds to any questions or comments. Generally, lots of comments emerge around the issue of recommendations or ideas for future research. The presentation of results also offers a good opportunity to discuss not only what was discovered about the research topic but also what was learned during the focus group exercise as a form of research and learning. (Time depends on the number of groups; 10 minutes for each group presentation.) ■

## Resources

The following are web sites that describe the mechanics of different kinds of focus groups:

Conducting Focus Groups

<http://www.cse.lehigh.edu/~glennb/mm/FocusGroups.htm>

Business-centric Focus Groups

<http://managementhelp.org/businessresearch/focus-groups.htm>

Focus Group Fundamentals

<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/publications/pm1969b.pdf>

School-centric Focus Groups

<http://www.smallschoolsproject.org/PDFS/focusgroups.PDF>

Evaluation-focused Focus Groups

<http://www.programevaluation.org/focusgroups.htm>

Focus Group Research

<http://faculty.chass.ncsu.edu/garson/PA765/focusgroups.htm>

What are Focus Groups?

<http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/~redgeman/Sampling%20PDF%20Files/focusgroups.pdf>

Focus Groups as a data collection tool:

<http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR16-3/piercy.pdf>

[http://www.ruraleducator.net/archive/30-1/30-1\\_Winand.pdf](http://www.ruraleducator.net/archive/30-1/30-1_Winand.pdf)



Focus groups and discursive analysis approach/ post-structuralist framework:

<http://pavlov.psyc.vuw.ac.nz/courses/Psyc%20325/Lecture%20Notes/Dr%20Weatherall/L4narrative%20psyc/Wilkinson00FandP.pdf>

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/14881375/A-Discursive-Analysis-of-Addicted-Users-Accounts-of-Opiate-Addiction>

The following are some case studies using the focus group method for research. Several of these focus on conflict:

Collier, Marcus J and Scott Mark. 2010. Focus group discourses in a mined landscape. *Land Use Policy*. 27: 304–312.

Harnish, Dorothy and Laura Henderson. 1996. Focus Group Research on Georgia's Program for Chronically Disruptive Youth. *The Clearing House*. 70 (2): 69-72.

North, Carol, Bett Pfefferbaum, Barry Hong, Mollie Gordon, You-Seung Kim, Lisa Lind, and David Pollio. 2010. The Business of Healing: Focus Group Discussions of Readjustment to the Post-9/11 Work Environment Among Employees of Affected Agencies. *JOEM*. 52 (7): 713-718.

Nurse, Jo, Paul Woodcock, and Jim Ormsby. 2003. Influence Of Environmental Factors On Mental Health Within Prisons: Focus Group Study. *British Medical Journal*. 327: 7413: 480-483.

Scott, Alister. 2011. Focussing in on focus groups: Effective participative tools or cheap fixes for land use policy? *Land Use Policy*. 28: 684–694.

Shafritz, Lonna and Anne Roberts. 1994. The value of focus-group research in targeting communication strategies: an immunization case study. *Health Transition Review*. 4: 81-85.

Susič, Tonka Poplas, Janko Kersnik, and Marko Kolšek. 2010. Why do general practitioners not screen and intervene regarding alcohol consumption in Slovenia? A focus group study. *Wien Klin Wochenschr* 122 [Suppl 2]: 68–73.

Weinger, Katie, O'Donnell, Katherine, and Marilyn Ritholz. 2001. Adolescent Views of Diabetes-Related Parent Conflict and Support: A Focus Group Analysis. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 29: 330–336. ■

# About the Project

This Experiential Learning Activity (ELA) has been developed as part of the Undergraduate Experiential Learning Project (UELP), U.S. Department of Education, Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE)-funded initiative that aims to enhance Conflict Analysis and Resolution (CAR) pedagogy in order to improve undergraduate learning.

The CAR field is uniquely positioned to deliver educational experiences that help students make the crucial link between abstract theories and practical application through learning activities such as: conflict mapping, intervention design, role plays, and simulations. The ELAs developed as part of the UELP advance specific learning outcomes, including critical thinking, problem solving, and perspective taking.

Each ELA produced through the UELP has been designed either to augment existing course curricula or to be used as a stand-alone activity. Instructors are encouraged to adapt activities to meet the needs of their specific learning environments, including class size and course objectives.

All UELP project materials are available for public use and may be reproduced without permission. Please ensure that all printed materials display both the FIPSE and George Mason University logos as well as the project URL ([tp://scar.gmu.edu/experientiallearningproject/home](http://scar.gmu.edu/experientiallearningproject/home)).

As your partners in advancing undergraduate education, we are committed to improving the quality of the learning experience and encourage all feedback and recommendations to support that commitment. Additionally, we welcome stories that highlight moments of student insight that arise from participation in these activities. If you are interested in supporting the collection of data for ongoing research, please contact us through our webpage. ■



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## Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education

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