

University of Twente – Programme Office of Educational Change

# Course Focus groups

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On the request of a couple of (bachelor) programmes of the University of Twente a course has been developed for students who will be conducting focus groups and taking down minutes. In this course the students will learn these skills by receiving theoretical knowledge and practice their skills. The course is largely based on the materials developed by Maria van der Blij, who developed a similar course in 2012 for students of the bachelor programme of Technical Mathematics.

**FOCUS GROUPS**

Focus groups are discussions with students about their opinions about and experiences with a module. During a focus group subjects are addressed that a programme or module teams would like to be commented on or receive suggestions for. A disadvantage is that focus groups only contain a small group of residence; because of this, the results can't be generalized to the other students. An advantage of a small group is that you can ask for details; the depth of the data that will be gathered is more specified. When something is unclear or you want to elaborate on a particular subject you can ask follow-up questions.

*Goal:*

The goal of a focus group is to gather deep information about certain subjects of the module; which have been determined by the module team.

*Why:*

During a focus group you can gather detailed information about the students' opinions and experiences with the module. Within relatively a short period of time you receive a lot of information and you can keep asking questions about one specific subject or focus on different subjects.

*When:*

This evaluation method is most effective from the third week on forward; the module has to warm up first.

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## STRUCTURE

### Points of interest

What do you have to consider when planning and managing a focus group? Three important points have been described below:

#### *The goal of a focus group*

What is the goal of the evaluation? Is it to get a global picture (of the entire module) or is it more specific (oriented on one part of the module)? Determine this prior to the discussion and tell the goal to the members of the focus group; so you can re-steer the discussion in the right direction when they are drifting off.

#### *The resources of a focus group*

During the discussion you will have an agenda with the subjects and questions that you set up with the module coordinator (or teacher of the module). You can use an existing format for inspiration, but don't just copy these questions. Consider what would be important questions to ask and which subjects you want more information about.

#### *The structure of a focus group*

A formal focus group has a set structure that consist of four phases:

Phase 1: Opening (welcoming everyone and telling the goal of the focus group)

Phase 2: Distributing the planning (explaining the structure/time/agenda subjects)

Phase 3: Core (discussing the content)

Phase 4: Closing (summarizing the core, repeating points of action and closing the meeting)

### Phases

The four phases of a focus group seem obvious, but the first two and the last phase often are forgotten. This can cause confusion among the participating students of the focus group; which may result in interruptions and questions like: "why are we discussing this? Until what time is the meeting? What will happen with the results?". So it is very important that the chairman of the focus group addresses all of the four phases.

#### *Phase 1:*

Show your appreciation for the presence of the participating students and tell them the goal of the discussion: looking back on the module and distributing constructive criticism. Giving unfunded critique upon the module is not the goal! Tell the students what will happen with the results, so they will feel that they are taken seriously. It is important that you explain if their results will be threatred anonymously and how they can give feedback on the draft of the report.

#### *Phase 2:*

The chairman decides in how much detail the agenda will be shared with the students participating in the focus group. He can decide to hand out the agenda to all of the students; this will make it easier to follow the agenda. A chairman can also decide just to name the subjects, so he can be more flexible during the discussion.

#### *Phase 3:*

Prior to the discussion you've set up a list of subjects and questions that are relevant for this evaluation (the agenda). This will be your guideline for the discussion. The subjects that are important for the first module of the first year will probably be different than the subjects that are

important for the fourth module of the third year; so take this into consideration when formulating the evaluation questions.

*Phase 4:*

Close the discussion by summarizing the most important subjects discussed. Tell the members again what will be done with the results. Of course there is time for the members to ask questions. Thank all members for coming and finally write the report (afterwards).

Tip: make sure that you don't overflow the students with questions about dozens of different subjects. If you discuss too many subjects you can't ask for details; because it would take too much time. So select a few important subjects upfront and discuss these in detail. The other subject can be named but not discussed in detail; otherwise the students will lose their concentration.

## **OOpS**

During a focus group different types of information are given by the students. Students will describe observations, give opinions and suggestions. These three types of information; Observations (O), Opinions (Op) and Suggestions (S) can be shortened as OOpS.

In order to write a complete report; it is very important for the chairman to gather all types of information. In the minutes the secretary should make distinctions between these different types of information, so he can state in the report if someone thought something or if it was so.

### *Observation*

An observation is an objective description of something someone saw or heard. These are facts.  
*There were a lot of changes in the roster.*

### *Opinion*

An opinion is someone's thoughts or feelings about a certain observation  
*The module was very messy*

### *Suggestion*

A concrete recommendation; what could be improved?  
*Inform timely about roster changes*

## ROLE OF THE CHAIRMAN

### What is the role of the chairman during the discussion?

The role of the chairman is **neutral**. This means that the chairman does not give his own opinion, even if the chairman followed or facilitated the module that is being evaluated himself. This is because the opinion of the chairman can affect the opinion of the students, for example by asking suggestive questions like: “ This module was interesting, wasn’t it?” .

The evaluation of the module only has value if you gather observations (what happened?), opinions (what did you think/feel about it?) and suggestions (how can it be improved or should it stay the same?) about the different subjects. Make sure you ask about the positive as well as the negative aspects of the subjects.

- An observation describes a situation of something that has to change or stay the same.
- An opinion gives a value judgement about if something has to change.
- A suggestion describes an improvement of how something should change or should stay the same (if something works well, a suggestion could be not to change a thing).

As a chairman you should try to be a bit ignorant; to make sure that the chairman doesn’t ‘fill in the blanks’ himself. Especially when the chairman has followed the programme or module himself and has the same opinion about a subject. The reason for the opinions of the student and chairman don’t have to collide with each other. So the chairman should ask follow-up questions to be sure. He will often notice that even if the opinions collide, the reasons don’t have to.

The chairman should try to stimulate the awareness that education and it’s quality is a common responsibility. The members of the focus group will mostly be focused giving information in the manner of opinions. As a chairman you have to ask follow-up questions and try to get an idea how students took their responsibility when they weren’t happy about something. When the members of the focus group tell, for example, that the syllabus was incomplete, the chairman should ask them if they asked for an additional syllabus. What did they do?

The chairman has the responsibility to gain as much information as possible about the different subjects. When doing this, he should try to gain Observations, Opinions and Suggestions (OOpS) for all of the subjects.

In order to gain as much information as possible, different discussion technique could be used. These will be addressed in the following chapter.

## DICSUCCION TECHNIQUES

### Listening, summarizing and asking follow-up questions

To keep a conversation going and to be actively involved in the conversation, you can use different techniques. Actively involved does not mean that the chairman is the one who's talking all of the time; he should be an active listener. Below; a number of skills has been listed that can help you to listen actively.

- *Eye contact.* By making eye contact with the person who is speaking; the chairman let him know that he is listening. This will stimulate the speaker to continue talking; when the chairman breaks eye contact the speaker will stop talking more rapidly.
- *Nodding and humming.* A speaker can be stimulated to keep on talking if the chairman confirms with him by nodding and humming. The chairman doesn't have to agree with the speaker, but he acknowledges the speakers opinion.
- *A relaxed and calm attitude.* If the chairman is calm and relaxed; the speaker will feel more relaxed as well and this can stimulate the speaker to tell more. When the chairman is restless the speaker can feel rushed and will feel less free to speak.
- *Be silent.* The chairman should give the speakers room to think by being silent sometimes. If the chairman reacts to fast or keep on blurting out questions; he can interrupt the thinking process of the students.
- *Parroting.* By repeating the final or the last two words; the chairman can encourage the speaker to tell more about the subject.

For example:

- Student: The module was very messy
- Chairman: Messy?
- Student: Yes, because .....
- *Intonation.* By making use of intonation the chairman can let the speaker know if he wants the speaker to continue speaking or round off the subject and proceed to another subject.  
For example:
  - Student: So I think it was a good module
  - Chairman: Yes (As a statement → enough information, continue to the next subject)
  - Chairman: Yes (As a question → invites the speaker to elaborate)
- *Rounding off and starting.* As a chairman you can tell the students how you think the discussion is going. The chairman can use sentences like: "We have enough information about this subject, we are going to continue with ...". Or "I would like to have some suggestions for this topic, how can we improve ...?".
- *Give turns.* The chairman should make sure everyone gets a turn. Some students might be a bit hesitant to demand a turn to speak, the chairman can give these speakers a turn by directly asking them a question. For example: "John, can you say something about this?" or "Lisa, did you notice this as well?". You can also encounter the opposite, a student that will not stop talking and will not let others finish their sentences. If this happens; the chairman should also take a stand; but be careful, don't be rude! You can use sentences like: "Peter, thank you for your information, I would like to hear Kirsten's idea about this subject" or "I will get back to you later, first I would like to hear what Sarah has to say".
- *Start a discussion.* Sometimes the discussion is more like an interview between individual students and the chairman. When this happens the chairman can try to stimulate a

discussion between the different students. He can use phrases like: “can you react on Peter’s comment?” or “Does everybody agree with Sarah?” Or you can make a bold statement like “This is the best module/project so far” in order to trigger a discussion.

Another skill that can help during the discussion is summarizing. The chairman repeats (in his own words) the most important things were said. By summarizing during the discussion the chairman can check if he understood everything and he can close a subject before continuing to the next one. This will also help the secretary; he can check if he wrote everything down and if he wrote it down correctly.

The last skill is asking follow-up questions. Different types of questions that can be asked are listed below.

### **Types of questions**

During the discussion the chairman can ask different types of questions. Below are a couple of examples.

- *Open questions.* These questions have a wide possibility of answering, it stimulates the students to talk.

For example:

How did it go? What happened? What did you think of...?

- *Closed questions.* These questions have more fixed answers, the student only has a few options of answering and as a chairman the information you receive is more directed.

For example:

Did the module take more or less time than it proscribed on paper? Was the availability of the teacher sufficient? Which days did you come to the UT?

- *Questions for explanation.* When a student remains kind of vague in his answers the chairman can ask for an explanation.

For example:

Chairman: What did you think of the module?

Student: All right

Chairman: What did and what didn’t you like about it?

- *Questions for elaboration.* Sometimes a student only gives opinions and he doesn’t say what this opinion is based on. In this situation the chairman should ask for a reason.

For example:

Chairman: What did you think of the supervision?

Student: Terrible

Chairman: Can you tell me why you feel this way? What did or didn’t the supervisor do to make you think this way?

- *Questions for differentiation.* There are scenarios where a student gives an extreme answer. The chairman should ask for nuancing or differentiation to get a more proper picture of the module.

For example:

Chairman: What did you think of the teacher?

Student: He was never around!

Chairman: He really wasn’t ever around?

## Handling with different types of members

Within a focus groups you can encounter different types and characters of people. As a chairman you have to anticipate on these different figures. Below a couple these characteristics are listed and tips are given on how to handle them.

### *The fanatical student*

There is always a student in the group who values his own opinion most and who wants everyone to know his opinion and agree with him. As a chairman (and secretary) you should remember that this opinion doesn't have to reflect the opinion of the group. How do you handle a student like this?

- The chairman can actively give turns to other students.
- He can ask the other students if they agree or not with the fanatical member (the secretary notes how many).
- Say that you would like to know everyone's opinion, that you now know his opinion and would like to hear someone else's.

### *The quiet student*

Some students can be a bit intimidated to demand a say in the discussion. This doesn't mean that this opinion is less important! As a chairman, you should actively involve this student in the discussion. This can be done in a couple of ways:

- Ask the student a direct question.
- Ask the student to react on the opinion of another student.
- Give this student the first turn when you start a new subject.

### *The yes-man*

Sometimes a student doesn't give his own opinion, he only agrees with everything everybody else says (sometimes a quite student does this). These students don't add much to the evaluation by themselves. As a chairman you have to take action. For example, you can:

- Ask the student why he agrees with something.
- Let him give reasons based upon happenings (observations) he experienced.
- Ask for suggestions, "if you agree this is bad, how can we improve?"

### *The troublemaker*

There are also students that disagree with everyone, just to disagree. You can handle these students the same way as the students who don't have an opinion. So:

- Ask the student why he disagrees with something.
- Let him give reasons based upon happenings (observations) he experienced.
- Ask for suggestions, "if you disagree this is good, how can we improve?"

### *The negative student*

Sometimes a student only gives negative feedback. This student can affect the entire group and drag the mood of everyone down; which can result in a group that only complains. How to handle this; will be further addressed in the following paragraph.

## **Negative feedback**

During an evaluation meeting (and especially during a focus group) where students look back on a module it is very easy to just complain, complain and complain some more. If you only receive negative feedback it's difficult to improve the module. Therefore; you need to know *why* something doesn't work and *how* it could be improved. You would also like to know what should stay the same; because it already works.

If you notice that the discussion is heading into the wrong direction the chairman should take action.

Try to steer the discussion back into the constructive and positive direction. Here are some tips:

- Tell the students at the beginning of the discussion that this meeting is meant to improve the module and you would like to gain constructive criticism.
- Ask for suggestions of improvement.
- Use positive wording, ask what can be done better or what could be improved (instead of "what is bad?").
  - Beware that your questions don't become too suggestive. Don't ask questions like: "this was great, wasn't it?".

## TIPS FOR THE SECRETARY

The secretary's job is to make an objective, relevant and orderly summary of the meeting. This means that the secretary has to listen well and make many notes during the meeting. The secretary should note down what the participating students' opinions are (O), what they are based on (Op), how many students agree and what the suggestions (S) are. After the meeting; the secretary should write this down in a short and clear report that is understandable for everyone (even for people who weren't present during the focus group discussion). To make this easier, the secretary can do a couple of things.

### Prior to the meeting:

- Make sure you have an agenda in front of you.
- Choose a seat where you can see and hear everyone.
- Come prepared to the meeting, make sure that you know what the goal is, how the report should look like, who the chairman is and who the participating students are.
- Make name cards for the participating students.

### At the start:

- Write down who is present at the meeting and who isn't (that should have been there).
- Note the date, who the chairman is, which module you are evaluating, in which year (B1, B2, etc.) this module is situated and from which educational programme.
- Don't participate in the meeting. It is very difficult to write and participate in the discussion at the same time, so don't!

### During the discussion:

- Don't write down full sentences, write in telegram style and use key words.
- Use initials to note down who said what.
- Limit yourself to the main subject: who said what, who should take action, what is it based on, how many people are involved, etcetera.
- Keep in mind that more people can have an opinion about one subject (preferably even) and that these don't have to collide. Write down the number of students who agree with each other.
- If you could not hear what someone said or if the discussion is going too fast, ask if the student can repeat himself or ask the chairman to summarize what was said (a good chairman does this anyway).
- Note down the subject that is being discussed (the agenda point).
- Use headers.
- Stay neutral! Your opinion is not important in this report; neither is your theoretical or practical knowledge about the subject, so don't add additional information.

## WRITING THE REPORT

### What should be in the report?

The subjects of the evaluation are the pillars for the structure of the report. These are the subjects (agenda-points) that have been discussed during the meeting; for example: content, assessment, resources etc.

It is important that the report is a clear and complete overview of the meeting. Make a clear distinction between an observation, opinion or suggestion (OOpS) and be consequent about it. Two examples on how this could be done are:

- First describe the opinion and give the observation upon which this opinion is based, then give the suggestion. For example: The students thought the module was very messy (Op) because the rosters were changed a lot (O); the students should be better informed about roster changes (S).
- Describe the observation, then to which opinion this led and what was suggested. For example: During the module the rosters were changed a lot (O), this made the module very messy (Op). The students should be better informed about roster changes (S).

Sometimes students can give suggestions without explaining why or what the problem is. It is important for the chairman to ask follow-up questions, otherwise you can't do anything with the suggestion; because:

- When students say a module was messy, but they don't say why; you don't know what the reason was. Which means; you don't know what caused the problem ergo you don't know what should change.
- When students give a suggestion without giving a problem; it is not clear why it should be fixed and if it is a serious problem.

Beware: a focus group is a spot-check, keep this in mind when writing the report.

Use phrases like:

All the students thought.....

Most of the students thought....

Some students thought.....

One student thought.....

Some thought.... And others thought.....

Tips for the report:

- Focus on the goal of the evaluation
- Stay neutral, don't let the report be influenced by your personal opinion and/ or preference
- Draw your conclusions from the results of this evaluation. Don't involve theoretical or personal knowledge about the subjects in the report.
- Write down what went well in the module as well, this could be a motivation to keep this aspect of the module as it is.