The RKI Guidebook to Qualitative Research and Dialogue

Prepared for the Partnership
for Kentucky Schools

By Roberts & Kay, Inc.
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Welcome, and ...

The purpose of this set of learning experiences is to equip you to plan, conduct, and analyze focus group research and other structured forms of dialogue that will increase the student voice in education policy and practice. Focus groups are a qualitative research tool and serve as a systematic method for inquiring about how things are, how people think, what they value, and how they are likely to respond to particular interventions. Focus groups, like all qualitative research, offer a way to discover new knowledge, at a rich, deep level. Dialogue is a means of engaging groups of people in mutual exploration, a joint search for new understanding, new meaning, and new knowledge.

The style of these sessions will be informal and interactive. Enjoy.

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I. WHAT IS A FOCUS GROUP?

Focus groups, or "group depth interviews," are a form of research in which scientifically selected participants discuss carefully crafted questions about topics that matter to the participants. Focus groups work best for gaining a deeper understanding of reasons behind participants' opinions. Unlike surveys, focus groups give researchers access to participants' own language, an invaluable tool for acquiring rich insights into participants' ways of thinking and feeling.

Focus groups make it possible to answer questions such as these:

1. How are Kentucky high school and middle school students experiencing school?

2. How is democracy faring in Kentucky?

3. What products and services do customers most want from their grocery stores, and what are they willing to pay?

II. GOOD FOCUS GROUP DESIGN

A. What questions does the research need to answer?

Work toward the answer to this question by determining what is the most important thing you need to know that you do not know now. One possibility is to identify puzzles and mysteries — what mystifies you about how people think, make decisions, or act, where they get information, or what kind of information they value and use? Research questions are those you can answer only after listening carefully to a significant number of people.

Aim for one, two, or three research questions. Focus groups are usually too brief for more.

Here are examples of research questions:

What will it take to increase the popularity and sales of asparagus in the United States?

What qualities do middle school students most value in their principals?

How can candidate X attract voters in the Eighth District?

How are Kentucky high school students responding to changes in the state's academic assessment process?

Work out your research questions here. These are the questions to which you want to find answers. These are (probably) not the questions you will ask your participants. The questions you ask participants are the interview questions, and they come in Section C.

B. How do you set up the research groups, and who should be in them?

Identify the population.

Focus groups are a means of discovering answers that someone else already has to questions that matter to you. Who knows the answers to your research questions, or who can generate answers through conversations with others? These are the people who form the *population* from which you will draw a sample to make up each focus group you conduct.

To achieve an adequate level of representatives, you need to know whose views ultimately matter to you in relation to your issue. Your focus groups should then be made up of people, selected as randomly as possible, who are as much like those people as possible. You may know, for example, that you are going to have to persuade middle class voters with no children in school that schools are important to them. You will then want to make sure that some or all the people in your groups are middle class voters with no children in school, chosen as randomly as you can manage.

Workability and practicality will influence your group construction in many ways. It may be impossible (in fact, it almost always is) to create truly representative groups. You may have to omit some characteristics you would prefer to include. Random sampling may not be possible. You may find that time, money, and the capacity for analysis will be big practical factors influencing what you can do.

Just do the best you can. The focus group technique is powerful enough to yield some good information with almost any group configuration you can manage, provided your analysis accounts for who was and was not present.

Decide how many groups you can run.

Between three and ten is ideal. On complex issues, you probably need at least three groups in order to place much faith in your results. On the other hand, it is hard to do adequate analysis on the amount of material generated by more than ten groups.

Determine the size and extent of homogeneity of the groups.

You need 8-12 people in each group, ideally. To determine who should be in the groups, you have to make two big sets of decisions:

1. How can you balance the goal of creating representative groups with the practical goal of making the project workable?

2. Should the groups be heterogeneous or homogeneous in nature?

On the question of homogeneous versus heterogeneous groups, consider the tradeoffs between costs and benefits. Some facilitators running individual groups prize homogeneity — groups in which all participants are the same gender, race, or age, or are similar in some other obvious way — because it is easier to create a comfortable climate for conversation when people perceive that they are surrounded by others much like themselves. Homogeneous groups also help in some ways with analysis, because it is easier to see whether one type of participants expresses opinions that match or differ from those that other types of participants express. For example, if participants are grouped by gender it may be easier to determine whether women differ from men in their response to issues relating to politics and governing.

Heterogeneous groups are appropriate in situations where it is important to see how people who are somewhat different from each other interact and influence each other on an issue. For example, if you want to know how women and men talking together may deal with issues of politics and governing, put them together in heterogeneous groups. The downside of heterogeneous groups is that analysis becomes more complicated. The complexity increases because it becomes more difficult to determine if there are important differences in opinions or values held by different sub-groups represented in the mixed groups.

C. What key interview questions will you ask to get the needed information?

Decisions about key interview questions include how many to ask, the order of asking, what style of inquiry is appropriate, and how long each question should take.

Determine how many interview questions you will use.

Usually not more than six key questions, often fewer. All should relate directly to the question you most want answered. Be careful not to do research on more than one major area of inquiry at a time. (We have made this mistake more than once, and it complicates analysis beyond belief.)

Decide on the order for the questions.

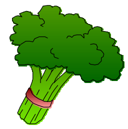
Approaches differ. It often works to begin with questions for which each person in the group is sure to have an answer. This contributes to a climate of safety, encourages participation, and reduces participants' anxieties. (The anxieties matter because they can prevent full expression of opinions, and that weakens the research.)

Try to make even the first questions relate to the topic in a general way. Once people begin to be comfortable with responding to the topic, move to general questions that are open-ended, and begin to give the group experience with the style of work you will use for the rest of the session.

Save the most important and "charged" questions for last, when comfort and relaxation are likely to be greatest. Often there is a point, about 45 minutes into the session, where participants appear to have stopped monitoring their comments — they seem to have made a judgment that it will be safe for them to express their real thoughts. After this point, the quality of responses is high.

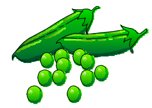
Save questions that require people to respond in some novel fashion for the latter part of the session. A request for something like drawing a picture works best after the group has established comfort, and is responding quite freely.

Here is one example of a thoughtful order for the questions.



1. Start simple and answerable.

   This is a group made up of people who like vegetables. Tell me which vegetable is your favorite. What do you like most about ________?



2. Move to general knowledge questions that help set the context.

   What types of green vegetables do you and your family eat in the spring?

   How many servings of green vegetables do you like to eat in an ordinary day?

3. Concentrate the key questions requiring the most revealing answers toward the midpoint and afterward, and use multiple methods here.

   When did you last eat asparagus?

   What are the qualities you admire most in asparagus? What are its worst drawbacks?

   If you could change one thing about asparagus, what would it be?

   For those of you who like asparagus, how much asparagus do you like to eat at one meal?

   For those of you who hate asparagus, what can you imagine doing to it that would make it more appealing to you?

4. You may have a section checking out products or approaches.

   [Showing two kinds of asparagus] Which of these types of asparagus looks most appealing to you? What is it that appeals to you about X asparagus?

   Here is a magazine ad for asparagus that is aimed for major markets in this part of the country. What effect does this ad have on your plans to buy asparagus on your next shopping trip?

5. End with an extremely open-ended request for advice.

What advice would you give people who want to promote asparagus eating in North America, to help them sell more of their product?

Characteristics of good interview questions:

Green light: (go for these)

Questions that lead to partial answers to research questions

Answerable questions (no specialized info needed)

Questions that look for reasons, descriptions, or explanations instead of simple opinions

Open-ended questions

Inviting, interesting questions

How ...

What is it about ...

Tell me about ...

What is your experience with ...

Describe ...

Imagine ...

What caused/prompted/influenced/motivated you to ...

What features/attributes/qualities/characteristics of X do you particularly like/dislike ...

When/how often do you ...

Where do you ...

Yellow light: (use only with caution and forethought)

Why did or Why do ... (break these up into motivations and features)

To what extent/how much ...

Questions requiring yes/no answer

Red light: (Avoid! Stop!)

Questions requiring special knowledge or research

Questions that will evoke emotions people are likely to experience as overwhelming

Close-ended questions when you want open-ended answers

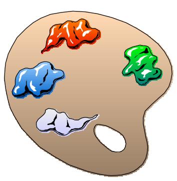
Questions likely to embarrass one or more members of the group

D. What are some good alternatives to use in place of simple verbal-response interview questions?

For most situations, it is good to vary the style of inquiry as much as possible, in order to engage people whose expressive or cognitive styles prevent their full participation in straight conversation. Be creative. There are lots of ways to do this. Here are some examples of variations on oral question and answers for you to consider when you design your interview questions:

- Have people <u>write</u> down their answer on paper first, and then have each person read what s/he has written. As you make the request that they write something, give fair warning that they will read their responses aloud. This type of questioning works well for questions with short answers, or for questions that could be answered by a short list. For example, "*I would like to ask you to list on paper the political commercials you have seen on TV this week. Then I will ask you to share your list with the group.*"

- Have people <u>draw</u> an answer, which may or may not be shown to the others in the group, which you collect for future analysis. Two drawings are often used for eliciting information about contrasting opinions. For example, "*I am going to ask you to draw something now on the paper in front of you. Your artistic skills won't matter at all. I am the only one who will see your art work. Please label your paper "A" and draw a picture of a work place where fairness in decision-making is the rule, and discrimination is not a factor. (After a pause) Now please turn your paper over, label it "B" and draw a picture of a work place where discrimination based on factors not related to performance influences decision-making, hiring and firing, and promotions.*"



  Another use of drawing could be to check on the elements of categorizing or stereotyping that will be important to understand in order to shape an effective message about a change in policy or approach. For example, "*Please write the word "for" on the paper in front of you and draw a picture of a person who supports X practice. [After a pause] Now write the word "against" on the other side of the paper, and draw a picture of a person who is against X practice.*"

- If you are looking for knowledge about specific words or phrases that please or offend people, you can make up in advance a list of lots of words and phrases associated with your issue. Give people pens in three colors. Ask them to read the list once and circle all the words/phrases they like in black. Then ask them to look back through the circled items and pick the three (or five, etc.) they like the most, and circle those again in green. Finally, ask them to look through the items they have not marked and use a red pen to put a line through the words/phrases they like the least.

This type of information can be gathered rather quickly, and need not be discussed, unless you want to hear from people about why certain words/phrases were categorized in a particular way. As a quick information gathering device, it is useful primarily to help you confirm or discard ideas you have gathered through discussion. The lists can assist you in making decisions about ways to state problems, issues, and solutions for particular targeted audiences.

If you are using heterogeneous groups and want information about which groups of participants liked or disliked particular items, and if you do not plan to have your participants discuss their lists, you will need to ask people to put their first names on their lists. Later, in analysis, you can look for patterns. For example, you may see that younger participants preferred certain items, and so on.

If you are using homogenous groups, you can simply mark the whole batch by its distinguishing characteristic. For example, in analysis you may compare the batch of drawings produced by high school students with the batch produced by middle school students and look for noteworthy or revealing similarities and/or differences.

- Have people respond to prepared materials — a written statement of your framework, a brochure, statement, newsletter, etc. Structure your questions about written pieces to make sure you get people to talk about the information that matters to you. For example, "*Take a minute to read this information, and then I will ask you some questions about it. [Pause] Now could you tell me if this information seems easy to read and clear to you? Would you read it if you saw it in a newspaper advertisement in your local paper? What kinds of people do you think will be most likely to read this if it comes in the mail?"*

- Collect a set of responses to an open-ended question about your issue. The question could begin with "*What would you like to see happen about..." or "What is it about* ______________ *(the issue) that makes it important to you?*" Ask participants to write the gist of each response on a 5 X 8 card, with a felt marker.

  When all responses are collected and recorded on cards, ask the group to stand up and organize the cards in order of the greatest priority. Give them a time limit — usually three minutes, and no more than five. Listen to their conversation as they decide which items have greater and lesser priority. You can sometimes get useful information about values and systems of meaning from this discussion.

After the cards are arranged in a priority the group can live with, you can ask further questions if you wish. For example, you can ask people to express the reasons for the location of each of several items at the top and bottom of the list. You can also select the items that are most relevant for your research and ask people to explain why a particular item was ranked more important or less important than another particular item. On occasion, people who have been silent for an entire session will become engaged in this process, will feel some ownership in the priorities, and will be more willing to express their opinions and beliefs than they were before.

III. GOOD FOCUS GROUP FACILITATION

How do you facilitate focus groups?

Your key words are warmth, neutrality, balance, and purposefulness.

Some of the people who come to take part in your focus groups may be apprehensive about doing so. They may view the session as a kind of performance or test, where their answers and behaviors will be analyzed in a way that will be to their disadvantage. You want to counteract that impression in every way possible, of course, in order to promote good discussion. Plan to make people feel their decision to come to your group was a wise one. Create a warm climate for talk through the way the room is arranged, and through your own behavior. To establish the proper environment for an expressive group, greet people warmly, check them in efficiently, and move them toward inviting refreshments when they arrive. Try to have the lighting and temperature at a comfortable level. Chat with each person who arrives about everyday topics; avoid the focus group topic. All these things will promote the relaxation and ease that promote free expression of opinions and ideas.

As you facilitate the session, put yourself in a role in which each answer is interesting, although no answer is better or worse, more positive or more negative than any other. While this is a strange communication position to maintain, it is quite manageable for the short time required by the focus group situation. Use a lot of "uh-huhs" and "thank yous" as your response to comments, avoiding the use of affirming statements like, "That's a good idea." Certainly avoid revealing disagreements with a participant's opinions, either through words or body language. Keep an interested, neutral face.

Seek balance in the participation among participants. Use subtle cues to encourage non-talkers to be more expressive, and discourage talkative types from taking up all the space.

The group will place complete trust in you to know what needs to happen, and to know when to move on to new topics. Do this purposefully. Let the group know that your job is to make sure they get their work done. They will know that you know what their work is.

The facilitator sets the positive tone for the meeting, and takes control of making sure the appropriate items are discussed. The facilitator guides the pace of the meeting, and watches out for the time limits for each question and for the whole setting. S/he gives both non-verbal and verbal cues to participants throughout the session to encourage every person present to participate as fully as possible within the time constraints of the session. The facilitator makes sure participants feel valued and are treated respectfully. In the most simple sense, the facilitator makes sure people know their opinions are heard. S/he maintains neutrality on each question or issue covered in the session.

The facilitator follows the interview questions faithfully. Some questions may need to be asked verbatim at least once, and the facilitator handles that. S/he should also be looking for rich areas of expressed values, opinions, or beliefs where follow-up questions could be productive. The facilitator is in full control of the topic of discussion at each point in the meeting, although ideally that control is not intrusive for participants.

Having co-facilitators is a strong approach that often produces good results. Work out roles in advance. Typically, one facilitator will ask the questions and guide most of the discussion, while the second manages the recording and takes notes. Often, the second co-facilitator asks questions at the end of the session that the first co-facilitator may have missed. The second co-facilitator may also present back to the group a summary of what they said, for confirmation and adjustment. In an alternative division of labor, the second co-facilitator may be on the alert for follow-up questions and may ask them throughout the session, maintaining non-verbal or other communication with the first co-facilitator about the allocation of time to each key question. Co-facilitating is an experience that requires a certain chemistry and a certain kind of integrity between the two practitioners.

An essential repertoire of facilitator behaviors

Pause: seven seconds

Invitation to express a different point of view:
- "*Does anyone see it differently?"*

Request more information:
- "*Tell me more about that."*
- *"I don't understand."*
- *"Could you please say more?"*
- *"Will you give me an example so I can understand better?"*

For dominant talkers:
- Withdraw eye contact
- Shift attention, "*Thanks, Chris. Now I would like to hear how the rest of you feel about.*."

For shy people:
- Try for appropriate eye contact
- Ask that everyone (or a whole section of the table) respond to a question
- (Less often, only when it seems appropriate) Call on the person by name for a response

For rambling types:
- Withdraw eye contact after the talk gets boring
- Turn slightly away from the speaker
- Do not take notes or reinforce the talk in any way
- At a pause, say, "*Thank you, Terry. Now I want to get some other people to jump in here on this question.*" Repeat the question, if necessary to pull the focus back.
- (Rarely) Interrupt. "*Excuse me, Evelyn. I'm sorry to have to interrupt you, but I see other people would also like to answer this question and I want to make sure they have time."* Then repeat the question.

IV. GOOD FOCUS GROUP ANALYSIS

Principles of Focus Group Analysis

- It all begins from your *research* questions. These are the main screening tool you use in looking through transcripts, listening to tapes, or working from group summaries.

- Use your *key interview questions* as organizers of the information.

- When possible, the persons who conducted the group should conduct or assist with the analysis. (Not always feasible.)

- Your main search, at first, is for *themes* and *patterns*. Read or listen repeatedly, over and over, and then some more. In this way, the information and its patterns will reveal themselves to you.

- Move from *sorting* content to *describing* the themes or clusters of information and then to *interpreting* what you have described — explaining any underlying systems of meaning or values you observe.

- Consider valid only those interpretations you can support using focus group data. These are some examples of appropriate ways to support a claim:

  > make a reference to a statement or discussion;

  > describe a thread or pattern that ran through more than one discussion;

  > quote participants.

- Emphasize those points on which substantial agreement exists across groups, and across types of participants.

- Discover and describe the ways people differ in their opinions -- the scope and variety, the full range of opinions.

- Identify any distinctive or unusual views not widely held that still seem worth considering, perhaps because they are a bit ahead of their time, or because they may reveal an important minority opinion that is held by enough people in the general population that it must be taken into account.

- When using direct quotations from participants, make it clear whether the quote presents a typical or an unusual view.

Analysts' Favorite Activities (While Looking at or Reflecting on Raw Information)

Noticing what happened

Noting those views or behaviors that stand out

Comparing information, meanings, groups or sub-groups, themes

Developing and tracing ideas and views back to a source or system of thought

Describing in a narrative stream what people said and did

Theorizing about connections behind views, themes, or patterns of thought (always clearly noting the difference between the findings themselves, for which you can provide evidence, and the theory that links the findings and explains them in a richer, deeper way

***Some of the activities on this page are suggested by Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Resesarching*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996.

Advice from Richard Krueger on Analysis

Taken from Richard A. Krueger, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1988; and Richard A. Krueger, *Analyzing and Reporting Focus Group Results*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998.

- Begin the analysis before the session begins. Notice the interactions between participants. You may need to know later whether previously existing relationships among them may have influenced particular views.

- Immediately after the session, the two session leaders (facilitators or facilitator and assistant) should take time to do these things:

  > Spot check the tape recording to see that it worked all the way through. If equipment failed, now is the time to reconstruct the session in written notes. If the tape is good, proceed to discussion.

  > Hold a post-meeting discussion. Record it if that makes sense.

  > Organize the discussion around the interview questions. Share observations on these features of the group:

    : What are the most important themes and ideas people talked about?

    : How did these differ from what we expected?

    : How did these differ from earlier focus groups on the same subject (if any)?

    : What points need to be included in the report?

    : What quotes should be remembered and possibly included in the report?

    : What the participants were like:

      : What key words or phrases they used in answering each key question

      : What themes developed in their answers to key questions

      : What sub-themes developed among specific sub groups

      : How enthusiastic and engaged participants were, at what points in the discussion

: What the participants' body language added to understanding their views

: What the overall mood of the discussion was

: Should we do anything differently in future groups?

: * What progress did you make in answering the research questions?

> If the two session leaders disagree, record both opinions.

- Place greater value on specific responses made in first person than on more abstract responses made in third person. For example, give more weight to "I have been with a friend when Hospice workers came to visit and this is what happened" than to "People say Hospice works okay."

- Look for the big ideas. *They are likely to emerge after a lot of digging for the description, then the interpretation, and after some time passes. Ultimately, the real inner patterns reveal themselves, and that's where you get some real "ahas."

- Focus early and often on the research questions: they are the purpose for the research. Moving toward answering them will mean moving toward successful research.

* Not a Krueger idea.

The Kinds of Questions You Should Ask During Analysis

- What words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs have a feeling of extra importance to you? The importance could stem from any of these factors:

    > Several people *within a group* repeated them or made very similar statements.

    > People *in several groups* repeated them or made very similar statements.

    > When someone made the statement, a substantial number of people in the group demonstrated agreement either verbally or non-verbally. (You have to be there to know about the non-verbal, unless the facilitator notes the agreement orally during the session.)

    > The statement came with a "charge" on it. It had unusual importance to the speaker.

    > The statement either strongly supports or strongly challenges your own views. (This is not a reason to elevate a statement's importance during analysis, but it is a reason a statement may strike you as important in the first place.)

- What was happening in each group when the words came up? What was the context of the conversation at that moment?

- How intensely did people state their views?

- How much agreement did there appear to be in the group when persons made key statements? How much disagreement? How sharp was the disagreement?

- What sub-groups held which sets of views? For example, were women 25-34 more likely than men of the same age to hold a particular view? Sub-groups may consist of people who have any of a number of similarities:

    > age
    > gender
    > location of residence or work place
    > shared interest
    > similar educational attainment
    > similar economic status
    > similar work or social background

- Did anyone change opinions in a significant way? What clues do you have to the reasons for the change?

V. GOOD FOCUS GROUP REPORTS

Purposes:

- To make it more likely that researchers will achieve clarity on what happened
- To communicate what happened
- To provide a historic record of what happened

Styles:

- Oral only
- Written only
- Both oral and written -- usually best

Table of contents of a typical written focus group report:

- Cover
- Acknowledgments
- Report summary, including research purpose*
- Recommendations*
- Key findings
- Analysis of each key question*
- Methods

* primarily found in longer reports

Richard Krueger’s Outline for a Full-Length Written Report

(Richard A. Krueger, *Analyzing and Reporting Focus Group Results*, Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage: 1998)

- Cover page
- Summary
- Table of Contents
- Purpose and Procedures
- Results or Findings (ideally, organized by theme, the most important first)
- Summary or Conclusions
- Recommendations (if any)
- Appendix (for example: interview questions; screening interview, alternate interpretations, etc.)

Oral Focus Group Reports

- Begin with a statement of why the research is important to you.
- Cover no more than seven points.
- Do not follow the outline of the written report.
- Pick topics or findings that are most likely to interest the audience. Be sure to put the most important findings first.
- Describe what you know now that you did not know before the study, and explain how the findings can be used.
- Use visuals, either on a flip chart or overhead.
- Provide 8.5 X 11 sheets to each person in the audience, showing the same material presented in the front of the room.
- Devote at least half the time to audience questions.

> The following section was reproduced from Richard A. Krueger. *Analyzing and Reporting Focus Group Results* (pages 109-120). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1998. It is not available in this electronic version.

VI. GOOD FOCUS GROUP LOGISTICS

A. Where and when will you hold the groups?

For most purposes, you will want to hold groups after working hours. There are exceptions that will be obvious when you are interested in working with a population that is available during working hours (retired people, for example, or students.) Saturday sessions are not usually very successful, but if you know your group well, that might be an option. It is most likely that you will be able to recruit most of your participants for sessions on Monday through Thursday evenings. Sometimes, with groups receiving an incentive, 5:30 or 6:00 is a good starting time. These times seem particularly appealing during the winter, and older participants sometimes prefer them. The typical starting time is 7:00 PM.

Ease of parking and perceived safety of both parking and the meeting location may affect your ability to recruit participants. Familiar locations are also helpful, but may not be possible. If you ask people to come to an unfamiliar place, let them know what part of town it is in and what landmarks are near, and send them a map in the mail. Make sure it is handicap accessible, through and through (including restrooms).

You do not need to run groups in any kind of special focus group facility. If the room is large enough for 13 people to sit around a table, or a clump of tables, conference fashion, it will do. You will need electrical plugs for the tape recorder or video camera, if you use them. Good lighting and good temperature controls will also help you create a climate of comfort once the group arrives, and this can affect participation positively.

If you choose to go slightly upscale, you can use a system of adjoining rooms, with a video camera in the room with participants, wired to a monitor in the next room, where observers can watch in real time without being seen.

You may decide it is worthwhile to rent a special focus group facility with one way viewing room. Prices will range from $250 - $550 per session, and that price should include food, an assistant, and a videotape.

B. How will you get people to participate?

You can recruit participants yourself, or, if you are part of a coalition that has some funding, you can purchase recruiting services from market research firms. In either case, you will have to define carefully the demographic (and sometimes psychographic) factors you want represented in your groups.

If you recruit your own groups, you can use mail, phone, or personal contact. Mail works well if you are recruiting from a specific group that has a readily available mailing list and whose members have a strong interest in the issue. Even when these conditions exist, you will need to send as many as 200-300 letters per group you want to recruit. You will need to receive at least 20 "yes" responses for each group you will run. Send recruits a confirmation letter, emphasizing date, time, and place of session. People will be more likely to come if you also call them the day before the session and confirm their participation.

If you plan to do your own recruiting by telephone, you may be able to find a way to do some inexpensive randomization. A research class or facility at a local university might help. Or you may want to use a table of random numbers generated by a computer (Mathbook+ is one source) or purchased at any college bookstore. Following a simple manual randomization process will strengthen your research.

The alternative is to just call or talk directly with people whom you know or whom you expect are willing to take part in a group. This is called “convenience sampling” and will still get you a lot of good, useful information.

For groups you recruit by telephone or in person, try to get 16 "yes" responses for each group you will run. That should get you an average of 10 people present for the session. Written reminders and phone reminders will have a beneficial impact on the number of people who show up. The more reminders each person gets, the higher the number of people who show up for the group.

Be certain during recruiting to inform potential participants of all the information that may make a difference to them. Let them know, for example, if you will be video taping or audio taping the session. Be sure you can guarantee them an exact finishing time.

You will want to report on group composition when doing analysis and writing your report. Carefully structured groups and recruiting that follows standard randomization procedures will give your focus groups credibility. For this reason, if you plan to spend money on any professional services, spend it on a market research firm that can do your recruiting and guarantee the appearance of 10 participants per group. You may be able to get rates as low as $400/group: more likely, professional recruiting will cost $500-700 per group.

Incentives for participants

The standard individual incentives commercial market research firms are paying right now range from $40 to $120 per person, depending on the part of the country, and the type of participant you want. Some non-profit organizations offer $15 or $20 incentives and build successful groups. Some non-profits offer desirable products (food products, t-shirts, diapers) as an incentive for attracting low-income groups. You may be able to persuade a corporate sponsor or friendly organization to donate something (discount coupons, tickets, goods, or services) that will have value to your participants. People with a strong interest in a topic can sometimes be recruited with no incentive. The promise of refreshments also helps with recruiting. If you can manage it, let people know when you are recruiting them that you will provide either a meal or a substantial snack.

C. What pilots or trial runs can you arrange to test the workability of the key questions?

Ideally, you will want to run at least two pilots. The first will show you the most glaring problems with your questions. You will see whether people find the questions inscrutable, or whether they respond to some meaning in the question that was hidden from you.

After you revise the questions, you will want to try them with a second test group if you can. This gives you the opportunity to see if your adjustments worked as you intended.

In some cases you may want to run a third pilot group. If you are uncertain after a second group that your questions are as clear as you want them to be, make further refinements and test again.

The more complex or out of the mainstream your issue, the harder it may be to get the questions to work as you want them to. If you know your issue to be especially difficult, it may be wise to plan to run three pilot groups.

Any pilot group at all is better than none. One pilot group is 1,000 times better than none at all, even if you can't do a second pilot.

Pilot groups made up of people who resemble your real participants are ideal. In reality, any group of eight or so willing people (friends, coworkers, family, for example) will help you a great deal.

D. The basic structure and order of a focus group agenda

1. Introductions: You may want to spend quite a bit of time on more than one style of introduction in order to warm up the climate for easy talking. If you can, ask questions that will engage people in a process of discovering their similarities. This will relieve anxieties, and promote talk.

2. Ground rules: These are essential. They prevent trouble, and help bail you out when trouble arises after all.

   Here is an example of one set of ground rules:

Proposed Ground Rules	
Yes	**No**
Speak your truth; tell what you know and believe. Speak from the edge of your knowledge	Interrupting Naming unnecessary names
Ask questions of other participants.	Whining
Listen to hear what others mean to say	Fixing blame without offering a solution.
Talk with respect for others and for yourself.	Personal attacks
Follow the moderator's guidance about time and whose turn it is to talk.	Hitting, spitting, hairsplitting.

3. Warmup questions: Use close-ended questions that have factual, objective answers, and that give participants practice early in responding either through words or through raising their hand or otherwise giving the facilitator information. Use questions that are somewhat related to the topic. For example, the questions can involve further demographic information gathering (this is sometimes needed to provide a check on recruiting) or can ask for a report on people's experience with some aspect of the topic.

4. Key interview questions: These are open-ended and exploratory. They may be precisely written, or may be asked in a variety of different ways to try to help discover what words or phrases elicit what type of responses.

5. Follow-up questions: A lot of the magic of focus groups comes from the facilitator's skill in using follow-up questions when s/he realizes that a valuable topic has opened up for discussion, or that a participant with a valuable insight has begun to speak. Standard follow-up questions are open-ended: "Can you tell me more about that?" or "Who else wants to speak about this?" Occasionally (but not often) the facilitator may want to ask a close-ended follow-up, particularly to check on the extent to which others

in the group agree with an expressed opinion: "May I see the hands of people who agree with this (restate opinion)? Disagree?"

6. Final comments: Work out what to say, if anything, about who sponsors the research. It is best to disclose as much as possible. Take questions here about anything that people want to ask, and if the questions threaten to extend beyond available time, invite interested participants to stay after the formal close of the session.

7. Close: Thank participants, give them information about how they will pick up their incentive, if any, and whether they will need to sign for it. Give any reminders about exiting the building, walking safely to parking, and other safety factors.

E. What points do you cover in the all-important opening?

- Thank people for coming.

- Mention general focus of discussion.

- Check verbally on comfort factors: refreshments, any needed materials.

- Introduce self, and give yourself a title ("*I'll be your facilitator*," or "*I'll be the guide for this conversation*"); avoid giving information that could sway opinions.

- If you wish, promise more information about the research project at the end of the evening. This is optional.

- Do introductions, using first names only. [Vary the first name rule in unusual situations where first names will insult participants. The main thing is to avoid recognizing status differences through name use, if you can, so that each group member feels her/his opinions will be equally respected and valued.] Ask for additional information if you think people can give it without any embarrassment to themselves. Information about each other promotes the willingness to talk. You can just go around the room, or you can ask people to write the answers to several short questions, and then read them.

- Explain that you will operate the session according to certain ground rules, which you will now describe.

- State the ending time for the discussion.

- [If using incentives] Remind people that they receive an incentive when the discussion is over. (Use your own judgment about whether you want to state that only those who complete the discussion receive the incentive.)

- Explain the nature of the conversation.
  - It is aimed at getting a lot of information in short amount of time.
  - It is very structured.
  - The facilitator is fully in charge of pace (participants can relax).
  - (Optional) Other groups are also being conducted on the same topic.

- Remind people about audio-taping or other recording (they must have agreed to this before signing up for the session.)

- Explain the way in which confidentiality is protected: no names or identities are ever used in the reports from the sessions. First names used during the session are taken out of written transcripts and never used in analysis or reporting.

- (Optional) Ask group members to hold each other's identities and opinions in confidence.

- Emphasize that all comments and opinions are right and valued. You will not be asking questions that have right and wrong answers.

- State that the purpose of the session is to see how many opinions there are about each topic, not to reach consensus or persuade each other.

- Strongly encourage disclosure of personally held opinions, no matter what opinions others in the group may hold.

- Explain that you will be the guide, and you will recognize people to speak. As much as possible, encourage people to speak one at a time, but assure them that if they get animated, you will help sort it all out and get it recorded for analysis.

- Let people know that you may occasionally rush some section of the discussion they find interesting, and may even have to interrupt some people to move on to new topics or new speakers. On the other hand, they may notice you pulling more information from more people than they think is necessary. Remind them that you will be the one to worry about all this, and you will make your decisions based on what the sponsor needs to know.

- Ask people to speak for themselves alone, not for others or for the "average person."

- (Optional) Ask for agreement. ("*Those are my ground rules. Can you agree to live them for the next hour and fifteen minutes?*")

- Ask if there are any questions. Usually there are none. If there are questions, they are usually of two types:

  Expect questions about who is doing the research and why. Depending on your previous agreement with the sponsoring group, you can either defer these questions until the end of the session (by which time most of them will have faded away) or you can repeat your carefully worded statement about who is doing the research. On rare occasions, a participant may become demanding, and you will have to decide whether to suggest that s/he may want to leave the group.

  Expect questions about the subject or focus of the research. Usually these can be answered by asking people to wait just a moment and see for themselves. If necessary — this would be extremely rare — remind people that they have chosen voluntarily to participate in the group. Anyone can leave at any time.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Anytown, Kentucky -- July 29, 2001

By signing this form with your first name and initial of your last name you certify that you have volunteered to participate in a group discussion aimed at learning your beliefs, opinions, and views about ___[Fill in before printing.]___, and that you further understand that the session will be audio-taped. You have been told and understand that the tape will not be used for either broadcast or commercial purposes, and that it will be used for analysis only. No identities or names will be used in any analysis or written product resulting from this session.

NAME		SIGNATURE: First name and last initial
1.	Joe B.	____________________
2.	Sallie K.	____________________
3.	Rita M.	____________________
4.	Bill F.	____________________
5.	Harry Z.	____________________
6.	Mo J.	____________________
7.	Jane D.	____________________
8.	Fred O.	____________________
9.	Pete A.	____________________
10.	Lena A.	____________________
11.	Jose Q.	____________________

VII. WHAT IS A DIALOGUE?

Main source: David Bohm, *On Dialogue*

Dialogue means...

- “dia” means “through”
- “logue” comes from “logos,” meaning “the word,” or “the meaning of the word”

Dialogue makes it possible to...

- share meaning
- create something new together
- practice collective thinking (as a microcosm of society)
- share common content and build on it

In contrast to dialogue, “discussion” means...

- breaking apart
- same root word as “concussion,” “percussion”

Pure dialogue, as Bohm defines it, is...

- more than 20 people (to get closer to a microcosm of society), and up to 40 or more
- no agenda/topic
- no leader
- perhaps a facilitator at the outset, IF...the group weans itself from the facilitator eventually
- requires suspension of assumptions
- seating in a circle
- no time limit

In its pure form, dialogue is not to be aimed at...

- consensus
- decisions
- actions
- tactics
- strategies
- judgments
- conclusions
- closure

Pure dialogue is not...

- discussion
- negotiation
- win/lose
- opinion exchange

- argument
- truth seeking
- persuasion
- therapy
- encounter

Dialogue may be...
- frustrating
- informative
- entertaining
- scary
- boring
- liberating
- joyous
- maddening
- transformative

Principles to Consider
- Good, reasonable people can and do differ.
- There are many ways to be right about most subjects.
- It is important to understand how others view the subject of the dialogue.
- Understanding does not require changing one's own point of view.
- Genuine understanding can be transformative.

Proposed Conversational Practices (Ground Rules) for Exploratory Dialogue
- I will listen when others speak.
- I will speak if I have something to say.
- I will avoid statements intended to provoke someone in the room.
- I will avoid responding immediately to provocative statements, particularly those aimed at my ideas.
- I will contribute to maintaining silence between speakers.
- I will practice respect, civility, and common courtesy in word and manner.

Proposed Conversational Practices (Ground Rules) for Dialogue in a Tense Situation
- I will state my own views clearly without making others wrong.
- I will hold an intention to understand others' views, and will listen to gain understanding.
- I will ask questions aimed at deepening my understanding.
- I will not use questions as a form of attack.
- When unclear about another's views, I will restate them and check on my accuracy.
- I will practice respect, civility, and common courtesy in word and manner.

VIII. EXAMPLES OF DIALOGUE DESIGN

Dialogue has many uses in specific settings, with a focus on specific topics. The purpose of dialogue on specific topics is the same as the purpose of pure dialogue: to increase understanding and to create shared meaning through rich conversation.

The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence and Partnership for Kentucky Schools are two organizations that have designed dialogues that address specific topics related to school improvement in Kentucky, and to other education topics. These designs are available for Governor's Scholars and others to use in Kentucky communities:

These dialogue "designs" are already fully developed:

1. *Your Thoughts About High School: They Count* is a dialogue RKI designed for high school students to facilitate in their own high schools, or with neighboring high school students. Governor's Scholars assisted in designing and testing the questions. The Partnership for Kentucky Schools wants to know if you plan to set up and run this dialogue, and they may be able to provide some help to get over the rough spots in organizing it. You may want to partner with parents, business people, or teachers to conduct this dialogue, and the Partnership is willing to try to help you find those partners, if you want help. Call Carolyn Witt Jones or Ellen Skinner at 606.233.9849.

2. *Parents and Teachers Talking Together* (PT3) is a dialogue RKI designed for the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence that has been conducted in more than 350 Kentucky settings, and will be conducted in many more this year. PT3 is designed for about 30 people, roughly divided between teachers and parents, who are all involved in the same school. It is a four hour process, with a break for a shared meal. During the dialogue, parents and teachers talk together, then in separate groups, and then together again, about two key questions:

- What do we want for our children?
- What do we need to do to get what we want?

The dialogue requires excellent, neutral facilitation. The facilitators (who could be you) guide the work processes that make it easy for the group of parents and the group of teachers to hear each other, discover common ground and true differences.

PT3 is not typically conducted by students, but it certainly could be. It might be particularly workable for you to facilitate a dialogue in a school near you that is not (and never has been) your school. It would also be a good opportunity to partner with a parent or business person for co-facilitation. The Prichard Committee's Community Support Coordinators train people all over the state to conduct this dialogue fairly frequently, and you would need to participate in that training in order to run the dialogue. If you are interested, call the Prichard Committee at 606.233.9849, and ask for Bev Raimondo. Explain what you want, and ask that the Community Support Coordinator for your part of the state call you.

These dialogues are now being designed and would benefit from interested "beta test" experiences:

1. *Ready to Work: Essential Skills for Kentucky Jobs* is a research report that the Partnership for Kentucky Schools has recently produced. It is designed for people in communities to use together to consider whether schools are doing what they can to equip students to work well once they get jobs. The research report, now being shipped across the state, includes a set of ideas about how interested business people and others can convene conversation groups in which people in a community can look at the statewide research results and consider how well they apply, or don't, to local schools. A rough set of conversation questions has been designed. The Partnership is interested in working with people in any community who want to test the questions by having a "pilot" conversation related to the research. As Governor's Scholars, you could take the lead or act as a partner with others to organize, facilitate, and report on a conversation in your community about workplace readiness among your school's graduates. Call Carolyn Witt Jones or Ellen Skinner at the Partnership for Kentucky Schools, 606.233.9849, if you want to work on this topic.

2. You are familiar now with the *Students Speak* research. The Partnership for Kentucky Schools is interested in supporting Governor's Scholars and other students, as well as parents, educators, business people, and citizens interested in developing more knowledge about the important topics of students' participation in education decision making and students' responsibility for their own education. There are at least three opportunities for local work based on the *Students Speak* research:

   A. You could form partnerships either with other students, or adults, or both, to present the research to one or more small groups in your community, and then facilitate a conversation about how the results apply, or don't, to your schools. The Partnership would like to help design the "interview guide" for that conversation, and will work with you to make that happen. You might be even more comfortable carrying out this presentation and dialogue in a neighboring school system. The Partnership will also work with you toward that goal, if you are interested.

   B. You could conduct a dialogue or series of dialogues aimed at identifying changes a school system could make to address the main problems students identify in *Students Speak.* This would be a dialogue-to-action process, and should be carried out with multiple partners. The Partnership will help design that work, and will be interested in its results.

C. As you know, you can replicate the *Students Speak* research in your own or a neighboring school. Based on your findings, you can find partners interested in hosting dialogue of the sort described in A or B above.

Call Carolyn Witt Jones or Ellen Skinner at the Partnership office, 606.233.9849, if you begin work on any of these possibilities.

3. *Difficult Ground: Community Leaders and School Board Service in Kentucky, 1997* is an RKI research report. In 1997 RKI conducted four geographically dispersed focus groups of community leaders who had never served on school boards, and interviewed 21 present and former school board members in the state. The purpose was to explore these two groups' views of school board service, and to figure out how to make school board service more compelling to more community leaders.

   The Partnership for Kentucky Schools, the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce, and the Kentucky School Boards Association are now working on an extensive plan to encourage experienced community leaders to run for school board positions. An information and education campaign is underway.

   If you want to partner with others to conduct a local dialogue in your community or in a neighboring community on ways to make school board service more manageable and appealing to community leaders, call Carolyn Witt Jones or Ellen Skinner at the Partnership's office, 606.233.9849. The Partnership will help you shape the dialogue, and will want to hear about its results.

You can build your own dialogue.

Now that you have seen and experienced the process of constructing good questions and shaping good conversations, you may want to develop and conduct your own dialogues on topics related to education and school improvement.

If you do, please let the Partnership know. We are building a new information base about these activities all over the state.

Good luck, and enjoy getting people talking.

IX. RESOURCES

Kearny, Lynn. *The Facilitator's Toolkit*. Amherst, MA: HRD Press, 1995.

Krueger, Richard A. and David L. Morgan. *The Focus Group Kit*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 1998.

There are six volumes in the kit:

1. *The Focus Group Guidebook*
2. *Planning Focus Groups*
3. *Developing Questions for Focus Groups*
4. *Moderating Focus Groups*
5. *Involving Community Members in Focus Groups*
6. *Analyzing & Reporting Focus Group Results*

Mason, Jennifer. *Qualitative Researching*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 1996.

The final section of this guidebook was an excerpt from Richard A. Krueger. *Analyzing and Reporting Focus Group Results.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1998. It is not available in this electronic version.