

Training in understanding focus groups' value in research

In understanding political and economic trends, focus groups are one tool that can be used to gauge sentiment in the public sphere and learn more about how cultural and political norms are changing.



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Focus groups — carefully planned discussions with a small group of people on a specific topic — are the ideal data collection tool for gathering information on things that are shared or have a public aspect, and we should be using them more effectively, more often.

A focus group is one of many qualitative data collection tools used in applied research and social sciences. The methodology of using focus groups to gather data in evaluations is particularly useful and assists in driving purposeful development.

Polls can err

Shortly after the US elections, an opinion piece on [The Guardian's website](#) discussed how wrong the polls and data were, saying, “Focus groups are the often unfairly derided sibling of polling. What some wrongly dismiss as anecdote is fundamental; they help us understand why people behave as they do and how intensely they feel about an issue. They can enable us to know which questions are most important to ask and why people answer questions in a poll as they do. They help us to understand the emotional connection essential for mobilising voters.”

Discussions moderated by a skilled researcher, who controls the flow of questions and answers, to uncover information and gain insights, help us collect valuable data on group norms, cultural and political expectations and responses to adverts,

social programmes, and even political campaigns. Indeed, some people who were using focus groups ahead of the tumultuous US elections were already seeing what could happen.

An article in [The Nation](#) shows “Clinton’s own focus groups found that, while ‘electing a woman president is a very strong motivating factor among Hillary Clinton’s most committed supporters,’ overall it was ‘the least effective positive case’ they tested. Voters were most interested in electing the person who would ‘make their own lives better’.”

Aside from helping political analysis, focus group discussions are also useful for problem solving and brainstorming ideas and concepts, through the creation of a team mentality and involving people in decision-making processes.

Benefits of focus groups

There are numerous benefits to using a focus group in qualitative data collection. Some of them are:

- They are quick to conduct as they allow multiple opinions to be heard in a short period.
- They are an ideal form of research in response to emerging events. They are therefore also ideal to assess a mood and support at a particular point in time.
- They can reach hard-to-access, or shy people who may not find it comfortable talking about certain topics individually. Contributing in a group provides a certain degree of anonymity and protection.

They have some limitations too:

- Some individuals may dominate the discussion and quash dissenting opinions.
- Because of the number of individuals involved, information can be shallower than that gathered through individual, one-on-one interviewing.

Training on focus groups

Creative Consulting & Development Works has launched a training series to impart skills and create rich conversations about creative evaluation practices. One of the key components to evaluation methodology is focus group discussions. It will be diving deep into how to plan and conduct focus groups effectively, as one of the methods commonly used in data collection. It will also show participants how to use various other evaluation and research tools to help them in their work.

The Qualitative Data Collection Tools course is being held in Cape Town on 15-16 February and in Pretoria on 22-23 February 2017. You can register [here](#).

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