

What makes a good teacher focus group?

**Top tips for running a successful teacher focus group for your digital learning project
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1. What is a focus group?

- It's an in-depth group interview on a specific topic. It's a qualitative research method that will give you detailed feedback on people's motivations and attitudes.
- A focus group can be any length, between 1 and 3 hours usually, and includes a limited number of people – between 7 and 10 usually works well. Any more than that and it can be difficult to facilitate.
- Focus groups are based on discussion and interaction. The role of the facilitator is crucial in enabling and directing this discussion.
- A focus group is NOT a substitute for user testing, nor is it design by committee – it's a means of getting input and feedback from teachers but is not a way of getting teachers to design a resource for you.

2. Before you start

Make sure a focus group is really what you need

- Is a focus group the right way of getting the information that you need? Should you combine your focus group with other methods of research? Depending on the scale and nature of your project, you may need to do other forms of consultation such as an online survey or some user testing. If you're working on a big project a focus group or groups should be part of a wider consultation plan.
- Will one session be enough or do you need to do more? If you have a large or geographically dispersed project or need feedback from a wide range of different people you may need to run more than one group.

Set clear objectives

- What do you want to find out? Be clear about the specific areas you want to concentrate on.
- Make sure that your objectives are appropriate to a focus group – they are great for getting qualitative feedback but if you need, for example, statistical data an online survey might be better.
- Make sure you're at the right point in your project – when you've got some ideas together for people to respond to but before the key decisions have been made.
- Don't be over-ambitious about how much you can cover in the time available to you.

- Be clear at the outset about how you are going to act on the feedback you get – and who is responsible.

Make sure you have the right resources

Resources include people, money, space, facilities – make sure these are appropriate.

- Don't underestimate the amount of time it will take to recruit the right people to participate. Someone may have to do an awful lot of ringing round and chasing up potential participants.
- Consider employing an independent facilitator. It can be very difficult to maintain a level of detachment from a project you're involved with. It's important that the facilitator is impartial, listens carefully to what the participants say and manage the discussion. They shouldn't get involved in the conversation themselves. See the notes on the facilitator role later on.
- Make sure you have enough funding to cover necessary budgets – teacher incentives and travel expenses, catering, room hire if necessary.
- Consider timing and location – see separate section below.

Recruit the right people

- Think carefully about who you want to consult with and ensure those you recruit cover the areas of experience/expertise you need. For example, key stage, year group and subject taught; additional responsibilities such as head of year group; specialist expertise such as SEN; length of time in teaching (this is important as an NQT may have very different views to someone with 30 years' experience). Recruiting people who don't fit your criteria just to make up numbers won't help you in the long run.
- Consider using a selection questionnaire to make sure you've got a good balance of people, particularly if your focus groups turn out to be popular. A brief online questionnaire in SurveyMonkey can help you identify the right mix of people.
- You need a representative sample, but remember people will not perceive themselves as representatives, ie one year 3 teacher won't tell you everything about what year 3 need. If your project is big and expensive, consider hosting several focus groups in tandem with other means of consultation to get a more balanced spread of opinion – and don't be surprised if two focus groups with a similar mix of participants come up with different views. The bigger the project, the more important it is to use a range of consultation methods to ensure you hear a broad spread of opinion.
- Dedicate admin time to recruitment – it's not easy and takes up a lot of time. Ideally you'll need someone who is available to ring schools in the morning, at lunchtime and after school and who can charm, bully or lie their way past school receptionists whose job it is to prevent hard-pressed teachers from being harassed.
- Consider incentives to get people there. It's reasonable to cover people's travel and parking costs and perhaps to offer a voucher as an incentive on top of that. £20 or £30 in shopping vouchers generally goes down well.

- You might want to consider ethical issues in relation to vouchers. I ran focus groups for a human rights charity that didn't want to offer vouchers for retailers that don't pay their taxes or have a poor record on employees' rights.
- Let people know in advance if you plan to audio record the session.
- Confirm with attendees a day or two beforehand to check they still plan to come. I usually over-recruit and keep a reserve list to fill any spare places.

Get the timing and location right

- Timing is important. For teachers, a two-hour focus group at the end of the school day starting at 4 or 4.30 usually works well.
- Find an accessible, quiet, comfortable room with no distractions, eg no background noise or people coming in and out – this is particularly important if you're audio recording.
- Make sure the location is easy to find for latecomers/stragglers, or have someone on hand to escort teachers to the room.
- Try to find a space with essential facilities nearby. Museums can be labyrinthine buildings and you'll lose precious time if it takes 10 minutes for everyone to find the toilets.
- Make sure you provide refreshments. Teachers will be at the end of their working day and some above-staffroom-standard tea and cake will put them in a good mood.
- Consider hiring space outside your venue if you think practicalities will be difficult.

Plan your session

- Plan in advance what you're going to cover. Create a timed plan, like you would for a taught workshop, that clearly sets out what you're going to ask and how much time you're going to devote to each issue. Be prepared to veer from this, for example if a teacher starts by talking about something you'd intended to cover half an hour in – you then have a choice whether to follow the discussion there and then or come back to it later. However, your session plan should be your checklist of areas that you'll cover during the two hours.
- Plan a break – one 10-minute break half way through a two-hour session is usually appropriate. As well as a comfort break for participants, it gives the facilitator and note-taker a chance to check how the session is going and if necessary plan any changes to the second half.
- Be realistic about how much you can cover in the time you've got. Remember you'll have up to 10 people trying to respond to each issue. Try to keep some flexibility in your timetable so that you can follow up new, relevant lines of enquiry that might arise.
- The kinds of questions you ask will depend on where you are in your project. If you're right at the beginning you might run a very open session designed to understand teachers' needs and motivations and find out their priorities. If your project already has clear parameters (e.g. a focus on a specific collection or subject area) you might need to be more focused in what you ask.

- For subject based learning projects, don't be too tied to the curriculum. School improvement plans cover a range of areas, for example parental involvement, safeguarding etc. Try to think laterally about how your project might support these areas as well as teaching and learning within the curriculum or at least create space to ask teacher to think about that.
- Give teachers something to do beforehand, especially if you're giving them an incentive to turn up. If nothing else, sending them a briefing paper with the background to your project will save you spending 10 minutes introducing and explaining it at the beginning of the session. Short web-based tasks can also work well, for example sending people a list of websites to look at or tasks to complete that you can then discuss during the session.

3. During the focus group

- Ask people to sign in and give you their preferred email addresses so that you can follow up afterwards.
- Use name plates or badges to help you refer to people by name.

Recording and note-taking

- Use an audio recorder to have a full and accurate recording of the session. I use an ediol (now snappily rebranded the 'Roland R-09HR' <http://www.roland.co.uk/products/r-09hr/>) which works well on its own or with a separate microphone. Make sure you've got fresh batteries, an empty memory card, spare batteries and memory card, and check it works beforehand. I also use the voice recorder on my phone as backup, particularly if I don't have a second person with me to note-take.
- Introduce brief ground rules – one person to speak at once, no side discussions, no interrupting, etc. Make sure you enforce these rules (as nicely as you can!) during the session.
- Ask participants to introduce themselves at the beginning to help the transcriber later on. It's also a good icebreaker and easy first question to get a bit of background about the people in the room and their experience of the topic you're discussing.
- Leave the audio recorder running during breaks. Often teachers will continue talking about the topic during a tea break and you can guarantee that the most fascinating or quote-worthy comment made during the whole session will be when the audio recorder is turned off.

The role of the facilitator

- The facilitator's role is crucial. They need to manage the discussion, keep participants on topic, and ensure everyone can contribute. It needs to be someone who knows about the topic, has experience managing groups and will work together with you to get the outcomes you need.

- Don't try to facilitate and note-take at the same time. Have a second person there to act as a note-taker and separate set of ears and agree clear roles and responsibilities with them beforehand. If you're audio recording the note-taker can help by jotting down who said what (voices can be difficult to distinguish later) and helping to make sure you keep on track. Facilitation is tiring, so if you have two people capable of doing it you could have one facilitate the first half while the other takes notes, then swap.
- The facilitator shouldn't participate in the discussion. You're there to ask questions, prompt discussion and listen – not to explain, give your own opinion or debate with participants.
- Audio recording is a useful way of shutting down unhelpful side conversations – just remind people that what they're saying will be picked up and you need the main discussion on record.
- Don't let the discussion drift – don't be afraid to interrupt someone in full flow if it's not helpful ("Thanks, we'll come back to that issue, but I really want to find out what you think about x...").

Suggestions for questions:

- Ask open rather than closed questions to encourage discussion. What if...? How would you...?
- Get feedback on specific ideas. Some people have said we should do x. Do you agree? Why/ why not?
- Check for consensus/alternative views – don't assume silence means assent. Does everyone agree with that? Would anyone like to express an alternative view? Do you do things differently?
- Give them exercises to do – eg ranking a set of items in order of importance; organising content – though this is something to get discussion going rather than make decisions for you.

At the end of the session

- Make sure people know how to contact you and invite them to send you further feedback by email or phone if they think of anything they wish they'd said on the way home. It doesn't happen often but very occasionally I've had someone email me afterwards with a brilliant point they hadn't thought of during the session itself.
- Remember to thank people! If you're giving out incentives, now is the time to do it (not at the beginning when you'll just take up time). E-vouchers are a particularly good option as they're quick to administer (you just need an email address) and mean you've got a reason to email people afterwards – and for them to make sure they read your message.
- Ask teachers if they'd be willing to contribute further, such as by commenting on draft resources or taking part in future research.
- Tell participants how they can find out the outcome of the focus group – for example, circulate a summary through an e-newsletter or email them your summary report when it's finished.

4. After the group

Writing up

- Consider sending your audio recording to an audio transcriber rather than doing it yourself. Unless you have an experienced audio typist on your team it will be much faster and more cost effective to outsource it. A quick internet search should find several 'virtual PAs' in your area and some have discounted rates for charities. An audio transcript will cost roughly 80 – 90p per audio minute to have professionally transcribed and will probably land in your inbox within days.
- Write up key points/decisions in relation to your objectives. Use selected quotes to illustrate key points and give readers a flavour of the discussion that took place.
- Consider a one-page summary of the key outcomes with a more detailed report for people who need to go further.
- Include clear recommendations that should take place as a result of your focus group. What needs to change about your plans, and who is responsible?

Using the results

- Share your report with the right people
- Make sure you use it to inform planning. This sounds obvious, but it's surprising how many museums run consultations but don't act on the results.
- Evaluate the consultation process you've gone through. Hold a debrief meeting with the people who were involved, discuss what went well, and draw out lessons for next time. What would you do differently if you did it again?

Building relationships

- Go back to the teachers involved for more feedback if you need to. Teachers are often delighted to be asked to contribute (within reason) to creating a new resource and ensuring it will be useful to them and other teachers.
- Use it as a chance to build relationships – once you've met teachers and talked to them in depth about what you're doing they often feel they have a small stake in your work will be interested in how it turns out. Get direct email addresses, write and thank them, invite them to a launch event for your resources when they're finished, and generally keep in touch.