

# Centre for Excellence in Enquiry-Based Learning Resource Pack

Title: Guidance on Focus Groups for CEEBL Projects

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## Introduction

A focus group takes the form of a facilitated conversation between a small group of participants, usually from 6 to 12, focused on the topic or issue in question.

Focus groups provide a versatile and efficient way of exploring the student experience.

They can be used in a variety of ways:

- understanding problems and issues to inform the design of a project;
- gaining feedback of students' experiences at key stages of a project;
- evaluating the impact of a project after its completion.

They may be used to gather broad general information about an experience, or they can focus in on a particular aspect or issue.

Focus groups are a rich source of qualitative data that can provide 'illuminative comments' that illustrate and give insight into other observations and findings, or be used as a complete research method in itself.

## Focus

When planning a focus group it is useful to decide what the purpose of the focus group is and define some broad questions to start the conversation. You may also want to draw up a list of key points and subjects that you want the focus group to cover, which can be used as prompts if the conversation does not naturally lead to those areas.

It is important not to over-load a focus group with too many issues and to prioritise the areas that you want to be covered. The idea is to provide time and space for the participants to feed off each others' comments and to develop their ideas.

## Informed Consent

The information that you gain from the focus group may be used for a variety of purposes: internal evaluation or dissemination of the project as a case study or educational research, possibly a combination of these. In addition, the use of the recording may also vary: a private record of the focus group, to show to colleagues or public dissemination. The

participants' understanding of this may affect the way they behave and the candour of their responses.

It is vital for ethical reasons that the participants are aware of the purpose, use and circulation of the recording and material generated from the focus group, before they participate and provide 'informed consent'. For material that will be eventually used for publication it is good practice to have a contract drawn up, for the students to sign to indicate that they have understood the level of disclosure. For evaluation and research purposes, the anonymity of the participants should be maintained as much as possible, to allow the participants to be open in their responses without fear of redress.

Drawing up a contract also helps the project holder think through clearly how the recording will be used and who will have access to the recording. This will include considerations of who will be responsible for facilitating, transcribing and analysing the recording.

An example contract is included as an Appendix. It is offered as an example only, not as an ideal or template.

## Participants

Selection of the participants is important. You may want to ensure that you have a representative mix of participants. Alternatively you may wish to construct contrasting groups, for example home or international students. This will be very much driven by the nature of the project and the aims of the evaluation.

It is not a given that participants will attend a focus group. It may be useful to provide a neutral incentive, such as some food and drink or even a book token. Catching the students just after a teaching session and offering them a light lunch may be one way of making it easy for participants to attend. This may be doubly helpful if the relevant learning experience will still be fresh in their minds.

If you require your participants to attend the focus group at a different time or place from their regular contact, a gentle e-mail reminder closer to the time may provide a useful prompt.

## Facilitation

It is often helpful to have a neutral person to facilitate the focus group. This helps the participants to feel less inhibited in their comments than, say, a member of staff responsible for the project.

The CEEBL Student Interns can act as neutral facilitators, representing someone close to their peer-group who will not be offended by criticism of the project and will not be involved in their assessment. The student interns can also offer advice and guidance to help shape the focus group.

## Recording

It is useful to record the focus group, so that the facilitator can concentrate on facilitating and not on note-taking. Some note-taking is also a good idea, as a back-up to the recording and to provide the beginnings for any reporting.

The CEEBL's central space has video recording facilities. CEEBL also has a portable video camera that staff can borrow; if required the Learning Technologist can provide support in using this. Otherwise audio and video equipment can be hired or purchased from the Media Centre:

<http://www.estates.manchester.ac.uk/BusinessUnits/TeachingSupport/Mediacentre/Stores.html>

## Transcription

Focus groups are often transcribed verbatim to obtain a full record of what was said. However, a summary report collecting key responses and illuminative quotes may suffice in some situations. Be warned that transcription and summarising is a time consuming activity; each hour of a focus group can represent a full working day of transcription. This is something that needs to be considered in advance.

Who is responsible for transcribing will influence the details of the contract and may reduce the anonymity of the participants. If the project holder or other member of staff is expecting to do this, you may need to consider whether they really do have time and

whether that would influence how the participants would react. You may consider hiring student, research or clerical resources in your School and budgeting for this in your project bid.

## Analysis

Analysis of the focus group can also be a time-consuming process. It can range from summarising what was said, including illuminative quotes, to using a range of qualitative analysis methods, such as content analysis, discourse analysis, conversational analysis or even applying grounded theory. However, you should start simply and develop approaches that suit the purpose of your evaluation and enquiry.

If you are intending to analyse large numbers of focus groups with relative sophistication, there are software packages that exist to facilitate this, for example NVivo

[http://www.qsrinternational.com/products\\_nvivo.aspx](http://www.qsrinternational.com/products_nvivo.aspx). However, for small quantities of occasional focus groups the use of a word-processor or manual marking and annotation of the text may be sufficient.

## Check-back

It is good practice to check back with at least some of the participants that in your reporting and analysis of the focus group you have accurately represented what they have said. Sometimes this interaction can generate new evidence or clarify interpretation.

## Some Reading

There are a number of books available in the library on focus groups:

Barbaour, R. S. and Kitzinger, J. (1999). *Developing Focus Group Research: Politics, Theory and Practice*. London, Sage Publications.

Bloor, M. (2001). *Focus Groups in Social Research*. London, Sage Publications.

Greenbaum, T. L. (1998). *The Handbook for Focus Group Research*. London, Sage Publications.

Hayes, T. J. and Tatham, C. B. (1989). *Focus Group Interviews: A Reader*. Chicago, Ill, American Marketing Association.

Krueger, R. A. (1998). *Moderating Focus Groups*. London, Sage Publications.

Krueger, R. A. and Casey, M. A. (2000). *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. London, Sage Publications.

Litosseliti, L. (2003). *Using focus groups in research*. New York, Continuum.

Morgan, D. L. (1993). *Successful Focus Groups: Advancing the State of the Art*. London, Sage Publications.

Morgan, D. L. (1997). *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*. London, Sage Publications.

Morgan, D. L. (1998). *The Focus Group Guidebook*. London, Sage Publications.

Morgan, D. L. (1998). *Planning Focus Groups*. London, Sage Publications.

Puchta, D. C. and Potter, J. (2004). *Focus Group Practice*. London, Sage Publications.

Stewart, D. D. W., Shamdasani, P. N. and Rook, D. W. (2006). *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice*. London, Sage Publications.

## Appendix

### Consent Form: Optoelectronics Problem-Based Learning

**Sponsored by:**

IEE Problem Based Learning Project

School of Electrical and Electronic Engineering, University of Manchester.

**Aim:**

To embed Problem-Based Learning into the Third Year Curriculum.

**Outcomes:**

A number of third year units, containing Problem Based Learning.

Evaluation of the students' experience of Problem Based Learning.

Dissemination of activity through conference and journal papers, seminars and reports.

**Research Team:**

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**Contract:**

- Information obtained will be used only in the context of the research project, that is, in the evaluation, development and dissemination of the Problem-Based Learning, and will not affect the treatment of the participant by the School of Electrical and Electronic Engineering.
- The information disclosed by the participant will be anonymised.
- Video and audio recordings of the focus group will be made. These recordings will not be circulated or viewed beyond the research team.
- It is anticipated that anonymised quotes from the interview may be used to illustrate points.
- Outside the research team, reference to the participant will be through a single letter and a brief description. E.g. Focus Group L, an Electrical Engineering student said ....
- The participant has the right to participate or not with the research study without prejudice to them.
- The participant has the right to review any material and withdraw from this process.
- Copies of any papers or reports will be made available to the participants.
- No remuneration will be made for participation in the focus group.

Name (Printed):	Signature:	Date:
e-mail:		