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USING FOCUS GROUPS AS A TOOL TO ASSESS LEARNING: A DEMONSTRATION AND A DISCUSSION

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ABSTRACT

This interactive session includes a focus group dealing with the theory and measurement of learning from simulations and experiential exercises. A discussion of the "how to's" of this technique is provided along with evaluation of its potential as a assessment tool in this area.

BACKGROUND

At the conclusion of the 1996 ABSEL meeting, there was a panel discussion of the need to research learning in order to advance the fields of business simulation and experiential learning. Unfortunately, most of the conference's participants had already departed. One of the authors was present at that panel discussion and began to contemplate possible research methodologies to address the issues raised. One potential methodology involves qualitative as opposed to quantitative research methods. The other author has researched and used focus groups to study communication.

As a team, the authors will present a forty-five minute session on how to use focus groups as a tool to research learning. This session will begin with a demonstration focus group in which six attendees will participate as members and all other attendees will participate as observers using the fishbowl technique. A discussion of the experience and a summary of the "how-to's" of the focus group technique and an evaluation of its potential as an assessment tool in the area of learning from simulations and experiential exercises will follow.

FOCUS GROUP OUTLINE

The following outline is provided as background for the focus group you will experience.

I. Introduction

A. Definition: 6-12 individuals, who interact freely in a candid discussion about the issue of interest.

B. Characteristics:

1. Everyday conversation
2. Relaxed
3. Semi-structured

C. History

- 1 Robert Merton (1956), Krueger (1994)
2. Commercial product development and packaging
3. Political campaigns
4. Health

II. Applications

A. Formative research

1. Survey/questionnaire design
2. Identify important issues
3. How people think and feel
4. How to motivate

B. Evaluation of programs, products, materials

C. Enrich quantitative findings

III. Advantages

A. Short "up-front" time

B. Unexpected findings

C. "Puts faces on statistics"

D. Good with children and low literacy populations

IV. Disadvantages

A. Time consuming analysis

B. Limited generalizability

C. Sources of bias

I. Preconception

2. Self-selection

3. Domination of a few V. Tasks

A. Develop discussion guide

1. Open-ended, neutral questions

2. Include probes

3. Funneling technique

- 4. Pilot test for clarity
- B. Select moderator
 - 1. People skills
 - 2. Knowledgeable about topic
 - 3. Experienced with identified population
 - 4. Remain neutral
 - 5. Summarize with member checks for validity
 - 6. Attentive, gives positive body language
 - 7. Gives feedback to researcher
- C. Select observers
- D. Recruit participants
 - 1. Recruiting strategies
 - a. Volunteer recruiter
 - b. "Snow ball"
 - c. Random sample
 - . Screen for homogeneity
- E. Collecting and managing data
 - 1. "Organization is NOT optional."
 - 2. Recording
 - a. Video
 - b. Audio
 - c. Transcripts
 - d. Field notes
 - F. Analysis
 - 1. Field reports
 - 2. "Cut and paste"
 - 3. Computer software
 - G. Interpretation

REFERENCES

- Krueger, R. A. (1994). Focus groups A practical guide for applied research (2nd ed). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Merton, R. K. (1956). The focused interview, The Free Press. Glenco, Illinois.