

## Introduction

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This booklet is designed to provide some advice and things to think about for people who want to facilitate focus groups. It is by no means definitive, but it will hopefully educate you about issues that arise during focus groups and help give you a better idea of the responsibilities of focus group facilitation. Ultimately, it is meant to be one of many resources for you.

With that being said, what is a focus group? The answer to that question largely depends on what you want it to be, but all focus groups share some commonalities. Unlike many other classes, which use instruction by an expert, generally a professor, as a model of education, focus groups rely on facilitation. The basic idea is that focus group facilitators are there to assist peer instruction around a particular topic. While the size, topic, and goals of the focus group may vary, focus groups are meant to help facilitators and other focus group participants actively pursue their own intellectual interests and further their own education.

This booklet has been organized into three sections that correspond with different phases of focus group facilitation:

1. **“Before the Quarter”** addresses how to structure your focus group and what steps you should be taking before your focus group even meets. This goes from the initial idea for a focus group to the act of designing a syllabus for your group.
  - Getting Started
  - Structure
  - Resources
2. **“During the Quarter”** looks at different ways to facilitate focus groups from day one through the last meeting. It raises some issues that may arise and provides suggestions for how to deal with them.
  - The First Day
  - Managing Expectations
  - Participation
3. **“After the Quarter”** encourages continued involvement in thinking about focus groups and reflecting critically about your focus group experience by pointing to some communities you can get involved in.
  - Existing Resources

Hopefully, this booklet will be useful to you in some way as you embark on the difficult, exciting, and rewarding experience of facilitating a focus group.

*Note: This handbook is a product of a Spring 2012 focus group with Blake Barnett, Freddy Mora, and John Brailey. It was edited and updated by Amy Peloff in Autumn 2012.*

## Before the Quarter

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### Getting Started

Idea: Of course the foundation of the course itself is the topic and focus for the quarter. Once you figure that out you can really build upon it and go in any direction you want when it comes to how the course is going to be taught, how many people, what type of assignments, if you will have guest speakers, what type of conversations you would like to have, and so on and so forth. These focus group ideas and topics can be anything you like within reason. They can be as specific as European literature between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century to as broad as a focus group on student debt. It all depends on the direction you want to go but, of course, make sure to clear it with Cynthia before you really start planning it out just to make sure this will be one that can be offered through the CHID department.

Description: Of course, you will need a description to put up on the CHID website so students can have a general sense of what the course will be about. Try not to be too long, but long enough so students can get an idea of what to expect in regards to the material and subject they will be exposed to. Sticking around 4-5 sentences should be just fine.

Promotion: There are various ways you can promote the class, whether it is through a list serve you are associated with, through an organization, or within on campus resources as well. For example the Queer 101 focus group is greatly promoted through the Q-Center here on campus. Remember to promote early and promote often.

Faculty Mentor: Always keep in mind your faculty mentor, they are a great resource and can offer a lot of insightful information to get your focus group going and ensure your course is running smoothly during the quarter. Also think about what type of commitment you'd like from your mentor during the quarter and make check that they'll be able to provide that. Would bi-weekly meetings be helpful to you? Should you two communicate via email or can you drop into office hours with questions? Being clear about what you expect from them can help make sure you have the support you need.

Credits: Focus groups are two-credit C/NC courses for both participants and focus group facilitators. However, facilitators need to spend more time and energy planning classes, creating syllabuses, and potentially reading the work of other participants. Accordingly, it might be in your interest to seek out additional and possibly graded credits from your mentor in the form of an independent study with them. This could be a good idea as it could allow you to reduce your course load and really spend more time with your focus group. That said, it's definitely not a requirement and you can still take two C/NC credits if you like.

Readings: Of course, you can provide readings that work hand in hand with the class. Readings are a great way to engage the student outside of class and are good to start out classroom conversations at the beginning of the following class. Just keep in mind to keep it

relevant to what will be discussed on the next class or throughout the quarter. One recommendation though is to maybe hold off on assigning readings before the first day of class. If you do, definitely send out an email stating the reading that needs to be done with a good amount of time for the students to read. Another option is to make the reading before the first day optional. This gives something to read for those who are interested, and again, be a good conversation starter on the first day. It is good to send a follow up email reminding the students of the readings if you don't have them on a regular basis. Catalyst can be a good tool to refer to when deciding how students can access a reading.

Projects: Projects can be a useful way to get students to think critically about the material. They could take the form of short weekly responses, a final presentation, or having students lead class for part of a day in a subject they're interested in related to the course. Of course, there are many other projects students could do as well. Be creative, but remember that you'll have to evaluate projects as C or NC, so be clear about what that means and be cautious about giving students a NC if they did the assignment. *Note: Student-facilitators do not assign grades, but they are responsible for working with the CHID academic advisor and their faculty mentor to determine which participants have earned credit for the focus group.*

## **Structure**

This section goes over some structural considerations for your focus group. Although the syllabus is given its own brief section all of the considerations here should probably be explicitly incorporated into the syllabus in some way.

Syllabus: Generally syllabi provide an overview of what the class is about, what class expectations are, what assignments will be, how grading will be done, and weekly readings. You should look at past syllabi you've had for inspiration for what to include and think about what was useful for you. Also make sure to include some contact information so focus group participants can contact you with questions. Think about whether you want this to just be email or if phone is ok as well. Are there specific hours you'd like to be contacted during? If so include those times.

Class Structure: How will classes take place? Will they be mainly discussion-based? Will classes be based around doing activities together like working on a project, watching movies, or playing games? There are many different ways to structure classes and you should think about what makes the most sense for your focus group topic. Another thing to consider is if you want to have any mandatory or optional out-of-classroom activities, like attending a relevant talk by a speaker on campus or going to a relevant activity together. Also think about what requirements are necessary to pass the class. What does the minimum acceptable level of participation look like to you?

Structuring Each Week: Think about what you want to get accomplished each week and try to organize them around themes if possible. Also let students know if they are going to have weekly assignments like short 250-word responses to the material. Assignments like that can be a good way to see what people are thinking before they get to class and make

students do the readings/other activities ahead of time. However, you don't want to put too large a burden on students for a 2-credit course. *Note: A two-credit course should involve six hours of work each week, inclusive of time spent in the classroom and the time spent reading and writing assignments and working on assigned projects.*

Final Project: Some focus groups have a final project either in the form of a presentation, paper, or project students produce. Once more you don't want to place too large a burden on people, but final projects can let people demonstrate what they have learned and produce something relevant to their lives. It's something to consider including, but be wary of making it too difficult to pass. One interesting final project that Queer 101 does is they have students present on an LGBTQ topic of their choosing at the end to demonstrate knowledge of the material and personal interest.

Catalyst Posts: Do you want to have a class catalyst site? They aren't necessary but can be a useful place to store class readings in a way that is easily accessible to people. Catalyst itself provides you with a walk through of how to make sites and discussion boards and can be a great resource. If you decide to create a discussion board for the class think about whether or not you want to make participation in the board mandatory and if so if that will mean a weekly post, a certain number of posts by the end of the quarter, or mandatory responses to others' posts etc.

## **Resources**

Although starting a focus group can seem like an overwhelming task, there is no reason to go it alone. You have a variety of resources at your fingertips whether you know it or not and can turn to many people for advice. Below is a short list of people you can consult and what issues they might be able to help you with.

Your faculty mentor: While many advisors are busy people, they can still be a fantastic resource for you. They have much experience creating syllabuses and facilitating discussions and can be an excellent person to talk through ideas you have for your focus group.

Cynthia/The CHID Advisor: Cynthia has seen many focus groups in her time and has a good feel for what type of activities might be good to include in a syllabus. She can also offer insight into some techniques to distribute peer facilitation responsibilities amongst the class. Most importantly, she knows what forms you need to fill out. Conveniently, it's her job to help students and be an advisor and you can schedule meetings with her online.

Technology: There are a variety of tools that will be discussed in more detail elsewhere, but technology is your friend. It can help you communicate with focus group participants before the first day through email listservs you get from Cynthia. Catalyst Posts can also be convenient places to store your readings or open up class discussion boards. Finally, there are lots of online resources about different learning and teaching styles. For example, more universities are now posting some classes online. There may even be a digital class similar to the focus group you plan to teach that could give you some inspiration on topics to include. If you need any help with technology in the class room like projectors also make

sure you know how to contact classroom support service for your building. It might even be smart to practice contacting them before the quarter.

Peers: Current and former focus group leaders can provide very useful insights into things that did and did not work in their focus groups. Although everyone ultimately has to discover their own facilitation style, speaking with peers and forming connections with them can provide valuable insights before and into the quarter. Focus groups are posted online and you get generally get in contact with current and ex leaders that way, or you could become an active participant in the CHID pedagogy library and help create spaces for peers to share experiences facilitating.

Additional professors/TAs: Do you have a professor or TA who you thought was really good at facilitating discussion or has spent a lot of time working with your topic? Try to reach out to them for advice/help. It can be a great opportunity to gain some insights from people who have been working with groups for a while and also provide another resource for you to consult with if problems arise during the quarter. Of course professors and TAs can be busy, but they will often make time to meet with you and it can never hurt to ask.

CHID Work Study Workers: The work-study workers in the CHID office are able to make copies and scan into PDFs for you. This can be an excellent time saver especially if you need to scan something in the middle of the quarter while balancing other obligations. Make sure to give them a few days though as they can be busy as well. If you know that you'll have readings that need to be scanned early on you can even take care of that before the quarter starts!

Pedagogy Library: The Pedagogy Library exists in the CHID lounge and has books on teaching styles that can help you think about issues around facilitating courses. There are also short booklets like the *Myers' Pedagogy*, which can be great resources on how to lead discussions as well.

## During the Quarter

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### **The First Day**

You probably have never led a class before and it can be intimidating to walk in on day one without knowing how to interact with a group, who the people you'll be working with are, and what their expectations are. One way to prepare is to think about how classes you've liked have handled the first day and getting to know one another. If they did an activity you found useful, feel free to copy it. However, if you have trouble of thinking of what to do, this section is meant to provide you with some ideas for things you can do on the first day.

Icebreakers: Getting everyone familiarized with one another is important to creating a working dynamic in the group. Icebreakers can be a good way to have people introduce themselves in a more memorable way than simply having them say their name. There are a variety of icebreakers from physically involved ones, to ones that ask personal questions, to more trivial ones like "what's your favorite food." I personally like the questions "why did you register for this focus group/what do you hope to get out of it" and "tell us about a class you liked and what went well in it." Both of these questions get to why people are there or what types of things they like in a class. However, there are many different types of icebreakers and you should do what feels right for your focus group and what you feel comfortable with.

Class Expectations: Clearly communicate what is expected of people on the first day. One way to do this is by going through the syllabus where you should have grading methods, responsibilities, and weekly activities laid out for people. This process can be boring, but it's good to let everyone know exactly where they'll be going while they can still change courses.

Get Input on Student Learning Styles: Either through a form or via discussion have students tell you how they learn and participate in class. In-class activities could include dividing the class into quarters with different learning styles (visual, audio, people that learn best by doing, etc.) and have students go to the area that they think matches with them best and have them talk with other students and then the group about what they think strengths and weakness are of that style. Another similar activity is to do the same thing but with participation techniques (devil's advocate, talks a lot, rarely talks, talks when they have a developed thought).

### **Managing Expectations**

As the quarter goes on you'll find that the focus group doesn't always go exactly as you planned it. That's perfectly ok and is part of what being a focus group leader is about. This section will talk about how to manage expectations for yourself and others as the quarter goes on.

The First Few Weeks: Focus groups are not like other classes in part because they are two-credit C/NC classes; participants may add them as an afterthought or bring a lower level of

intensity to focus groups than other classes. One way this can express itself is that people tend to register for focus groups later than other courses, so it is likely you will have people show up to your first day who aren't on the class list. Accordingly, it is best to bring extra copies of the copies of the syllabus on the first day so everyone can have one and to walk through it so everyone can get a sense of where the group is headed. It is also possible you'll have people on the class list not show up on day one or at all. Additionally, there is a "shopping period" for focus groups that can last for the first week or two where individuals will check out your focus group and leave. Don't take people dropping your focus group personally as it often has more to do with their schedules than anything you did and if they weren't actually interested in the topic, it's probably for the best. Given that some people register for focus groups and never go to them and that other people could stop attending early on it is important to check your class registration with the CHID advisor after week 2 or 3 to make sure people actually dropped your class. There is nothing worse than getting to the end of the quarter and having to give someone you thought dropped a NC. Also, keep in mind that the size of your focus group can change classroom dynamics. Both small and large focus groups can be awesome, but in larger ones there will probably be some people who aren't as involved. Don't worry if your focus group is small, because small groups can often have the best conversations.

Grading: In the first week it is also important to set expectations for what Credit/No Credit (C/NC) means in the context of your focus group. The general guideline is that all assignments must be satisfactorily completed, and students may not have more than two unexcused absences in order to get credit for the class. While you have some leeway in defining what this means, we recommend that you keep with the spirit of focus groups and not add too many stipulations on what exactly you want that to look like. At the end of the quarter, student-facilitators do not assign grades, but they are responsible for working with the CHID academic advisor and their faculty mentor to determine which participants have earned credit for the focus group.

As you think about the workload for your focus group, it is important to keep in mind that a 2-credit course should involve 6 hours of work each week, inclusive of time spent in the classroom and the time spent reading and writing assignments and working on assigned projects. If you are going to have weekly or final assignments, you should be very clear about what constitutes a C or a NC for the project. Generally, if people complete their project you should provide them with a C, but you are still free to define what completing a project entails. Standards need to be clear and reasonable to encourage participation.

There are a few things that can result in a student not receiving credit. For example, CHID specifies that no more than two absences are allowed without receiving a NC. Consequently, you might want to think about how you will enforce that policy. One way would be to take roll in a central location so you can visibly see who showed up when without having to rely on memory. This could be notes you make to yourself or an official sign-in sheet. If you feel like students who have missed more than two classes have legitimate reasons for being gone, you can always give them an opportunity to make up their absence by writing a response to a reading, or having them respond to a talk on campus, movie, etc. Ultimately, the decision to give an NC based on absences is determined by the CHID advisor, your faculty mentor, and you.

Changing Dynamics: As the quarter goes on the class will begin to develop a feel and you'll notice people settle into established dynamics. This can be a very good thing, but following is meant to help you deal with some problems that may arise.

- **People not talking**: Note that just because someone isn't talking does not mean that they are not participating. Some people can be actively engaged listening to conversation but not want to contribute for a variety of reasons. The goal is to create an environment where everyone feels invited to participate without being judged. Sometimes people might need encouragement so you might pause conversation to ask for input from people who have said less that day. Another solution is to do "go-arounds" where everyone contributes one thought on an open-ended question like "what was your reaction to the readings?" Unless it's a big problem it is probably best not to single out any individuals.
- **The same people talking**: On the opposite end of the spectrum you could notice that the focus group is becoming a three- or four-way conversation between a few focus group members. Here it is best to think of alternative ways of intervention to get the whole class involved instead of specifically asking individuals to be quiet. There will be more strategies for both of these in the following section.
- **Changing Expectations**: As the quarter drags on and people, including yourself, realize the full weight of their schedules, it might be good to check in and see if the focus group feels like the right amount of work. Make sure to check in with yourself as you go along to make sure you are balancing commitments in a way that allows you to plan for the focus group. It is also ok to change and adjust the syllabus during the quarter if you feel like readings have gotten too heavy or that you might want to do an activity together one week instead of meeting. Keep in touch with members of your focus group and try to judge their attitudes. Have faith in your plans for the quarter, but be willing to make adjustments as well.

## **Participation**

How to encourage: We want students to actively engage in the conversations, so how might we get students to do so? Find classroom discussions that are relevant and may be of interest. You could also bring in treats to get students excited, which will motivate them to discuss. There is nothing like good brain food! People love snacks! Let them know there are no wrong or right questions and answers to help them feel secure about answering questions. It is always good to ask open-ended questions as well in order to start a classroom conversation. Icebreakers related to the material can be a great way to start off the class and get things rolling along.

How to deal with difficult students: Always talk to the student after class, never before. You don't want to single anyone out, for these are small classes and can make things awkward. You want to let the student know that we want students to grow, and how they are affecting the learning environment. By pulling them aside one-on-one you can have a more



in-depth conversation and gain a more insightful and better understanding of what is the issue and how you can both work to resolve it. Give them a warning and if that doesn't work refer them to your faculty mentor.

How to deal with inactive/uninvolved students: Focus groups are credit/no-credit classes, and are therefore heavily reliant on participation. Asking for people who haven't said anything yet to provide a comment can be a way to get people involved without singling them out. Go-arounds where everyone says one comment can be another way of getting everyone to participate. If needed, you can talk to a student after class not to chastise them, but to show concern about their involvement and see why is it they aren't getting involved. Maybe they are uncomfortable with the topic? See how you can make this a better learning environment for all.

How to deal with offensive issues: This has to be dealt with more seriously and should be discussed with the student outside of the class. However, if a student makes an offensive remark during class, do bring attention to it and state a more appropriate way to phrase what was said and correct it. This is also a great time for you to consult with your faculty mentor and/or the CHID advisor for ideas on how to handle these situations. There are going to be different views in the focus group, and we want to embrace them all, but we cannot offend anyone in the discussions. Many focus groups are going to have conflicting views and ideas, which is what makes these courses so great. They can be seen as a growing process for some or many, and we want to take everyone's opinion into consideration and try to avoid shooting anyone down, unless it gets offensive. In that situation, we need to draw it back in and find ways to shed light on what was just mentioned and handle it in an educated manner.

Ways to check in: Try to check in on classroom dynamics in a variety of ways. At the end of class you could go around and have people say what did or didn't work for them at the meeting. If you're pressed for time having people rate the class on a scale of 1-5 with their fingers can be a quick way to see how the class went for people. Less frequent check-ins like written mid-quarter evaluations of personal contributions and thoughts on the class as a whole can also be useful.

## After the Quarter

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Just because your focus group is over doesn't mean you have to leave the experience behind you. Take time to reflect about what went well and what didn't. Hopefully you learned many lessons about yourself, how education operates, communicating ideas with others, and the topic you chose to engage. You can and should reflect on all of these personally, but this section is meant to let you know about opportunities to bring your experience back to the CHID community to help improve how focus groups operate in general.

### Existing Resources

Debrief: Talk to peers in your focus group, other focus group leaders, your faculty mentor, and whoever you feel comfortable with about your experience to help you think about what happened and to help innovate ideas for how to improve focus groups. CHID believes that students are agents of their own education, which means if you want to help rethink or build up focus groups you are empowered to do so. There are many individuals and communities willing to help!

Peer Facilitation Committee: The Peer Facilitation Committee is an official committee that deals with how peer facilitators in classes are used. They have input on what requirements should be for classes that use peer facilitation. They also could be a good group to get involved with for thinking about what type of structural support and requirements CHID can offer for focus groups. **[This committee is currently inactive. Please contact the CHID advisor if you would like to be involved in it.]**

The Pedagogy Library: The library is in the CHID lounge and has many books related to pedagogy styles. It is also run by a group of students. Getting involved in this organization can create opportunities to make sure they have materials useful to focus group leaders. The library also runs facilitation workshops and you could participate in those as someone with facilitation experience or help create workshops to address issues that you faced. You could also use the space and maybe some resources to help create facilitation workshops for future/current/past focus group leaders to get together and exchange ideas. **[This committee is currently inactive. Please contact the CHID advisor if you would like to be involved in it.]**