

CREE Focus Groups: Guidelines and Criteria

The following criteria are proposed for the organisation of focus groups within the CREE project. This is intended as a draft document and comments are welcome. These criteria will comprise Deliverable S1D4 as stated in the project plan.

General:

1. These focus groups will take place at three partner sites: the University of Hull, the University of Oxford, and Newark & Sherwood College. All partners, though, are welcome to feed into the criteria to be used.
2. The focus groups will ideally take place in November 2004. Where necessary, groups can also be arranged in December. When planning dates, bear in mind that all focus group analysis needs to be completed by Christmas to enable planning for subsequent stages of the project in 2005.

Structure

1. Guidance on the use of focus groups recommends that the best size for a focus group is 6-10 people. More than this should be invited, however, to allow for people not being able to attend or not turning up. It is proposed that 12 people are invited to each group: if all attend then the group is not so large as to be unmanageable; if some drop out there are still enough people to make the exercise worthwhile.
2. Guidance on focus groups also recommends a length of 1-2 hours. Experience and the busy lives of those within universities and colleges suggest that the shorter this is the better, so long as enough time is given for satisfactory discussion. It is proposed that a time of 1.5 hours is advertised, but that the group should look to wrap up after 1 hour and finish early – see section on procedure below for more on this.

Who?

1. In order to match results and outputs from the focus groups with the survey users in all the group categories listed in the survey need to be included in the focus groups. These are:
 - Teaching staff
 - Clerical staff
 - Library staff
 - Support staff
 - Research staff
 - Undergraduate student
 - Postgraduate Student Research
 - Postgraduate Student Teaching
2. It will not be feasible to run separate focus groups for each of these categories of staff. Due to the common separation of the way services are presented to staff and students, it is proposed that the division is made between staff and student categories
3. It is proposed that two focus groups are run at each partner site for staff and two for students. In addition, the University of Hull will organise one focus group for each group at the Scarborough campus of the University. This will result in 14 focus groups in total covering an estimated 120 people (assuming 8-10 people attending each).
4. It is proposed that only one session be held with each group. However, the willingness of participants to take part in subsequent sessions and/or user testing should be ascertained for reference.
5. Incentives to attract users to the focus groups are being considered and suggestions are welcome. Refreshments are an obvious possibility, dependent on the time the focus group is held.

6. The best way to invite individuals to take part in a focus group will be known locally. Nevertheless, the University of Hull will prepare invitation text for adaptation. This will cover background to the project, the purpose of the focus group and incentives; dates, times, venues and a contact number/email can be appended accordingly. Once people have agreed to attend they should complete a registration form, which will outline the ethical and confidentiality aspects of taking part.
7. Participants should ideally have some experience of using search systems so they can express views based on this.

Organisation

1. The focus groups should be hosted in a neutral venue where possible. This may not be the meeting facility associated with partners' departments, but this is a local decision to be made.
2. There should be two moderators wherever possible. One should act as the facilitator for the session and one should act as note taker. All focus groups should be recorded for later transcription – please let me know how feasible this will be at your site – and ideally recorded on two devices to avoid technical failure losing a session.
3. The start time should be advertised as 10-15 minutes earlier than your planned start for the group to allow for refreshments to be served, where applicable. This should be additional to the 1.5-hour time slot.

Purpose and aim

1. The purpose of the focus groups is three-fold:
 - a. To extend the baseline of information established from the results from the survey, and test out the findings from this.
 - b. To more deeply explore the concepts and issues revolving around how search tools are presented to users, plus user's desires for how this should be accomplished.
 - c. To extract issues and ideas that can be tested further through subsequent survey activity and user testing with the demonstrators within the CREE project.
2. The aim of the focus groups is to enable organised discussion around the issues that the CREE project has set out to explore and test, plus the findings of the survey.
3. Many of the issues to be discussed will result from analysis of the survey results, to be carried out in the second half of October. A preliminary set of issues based on the project's aims will be circulated prior to this to frame this analysis.

Procedure

1. Participants should be welcomed as they arrive and small talk (on topics other than that of the focus group) encouraged. Participants may not know each other and can be introduced as working or studying in different parts of the institution. Refreshments can help at this stage.
2. The moderator should introduce the focus group. This introduction should set the mood for the discussion and highlight the key aims for the group; I shall prepare a short presentation for use if required. The group should not feel it needs to reach a conclusion or any kind of consensus, as there probably isn't one – the CREE project is there to test out different possibilities!
3. The issues to be discussed should be presented to the group in the form of open questions to promote discussion and expression of views, probably no more than 5 or 6 in the time available. The pace and rate at which the moderator introduces a new question will depend on the way discussion is proceeding: if a discussion is going well it shouldn't be cut off; but if time is passing there will be a need to move on so as to cover all the issues. Look for natural links from one issue to another and prompt a shift in the discussion to move the group on. Ideally, a focus group should sit halfway between a timed agenda and brainstorming session.

4. The overall aim for the moderator should be to facilitate organised discussion, or steered conversation, around the issues. Ideally the moderator should play as small a role as possible, with the group conducting the majority of the discussion and the moderator listening. Avoid short verbal responses, which may break up a response or discussion.
5. Where an individual is dominating a discussion, they should be thanked and the discussion moved to another issue. Where an individual is not taking part, they should be encouraged to contribute their views. If discussion is not forthcoming, ask the question(s) individually and then invite response and comment.
6. The moderator should not be seen as the expert, but as a facilitator. Questions from participants should be asked for clarification, not to seek answers to the issues.
7. After 1 hour the moderator should seek to wrap up the session and summarise the issues raised. Each participant should be offered the chance to make one final point based on the discussion as a whole – their summary of the discussion. Participants should be thanked and the session can end (hopefully earlier than the 1.5-hour limit).

De-briefing

1. De-briefing for each focus group should take place as a soon as possible after it has ended so that the discussions are fresh in the mind. The aim of this should not be a full analysis, which can be done later, but a chance to fully clarify exactly what was discussed and that this has been recorded appropriately to enable later analysis.

These notes were compiled using the following references, which may provide additional background material of use when planning focus groups locally.

Social Research Update on Focus Groups from the University of Surrey
<http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/sru/SRU19.html>

Focus Group Methodology for the EU MADAME project
<http://www.shef.ac.uk/~scgisa/MADAMENew/Deliverables/FGEnd1.htm>

Focus Group Interviews: a paper supporting an EU project on migrants
<http://www.iprs.it/sis/focusgroup.htm>

Focus Group Discussion: a module from a training course delivered by the Canadian International Development Research Centre
http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-56615-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

Rather sadly, these appear on the first page of a Google search for 'organising focus groups'. If anyone has any other sources that could be used to develop these guidelines further, then please let me know. Caroline Ingram has recommended the following. The first is particularly good on the steps involved in analysis and reporting. I can provide a copy of the second if you do not have access.

Using Focus Groups for Evaluation
<http://ag.arizona.edu/fcs/cyfernet/cyfar/focus.htm>

Rethinking the Focus Group in Media and Communications Research
<http://joc.oupjournals.org/cgi/content/abstract/46/2/79>

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