

Focus groups with creative elements, PI – interviews

Elinor Brunnberg
elinor.brunnberg@mdh.se

Focus group discussions are used to examine individuals' perceptions and experiences of a particular topic (Kitzinger, 1994; Tinnfält, 2007). The method has been used since the 1920s in studies of attitudes and perceptions (McLafferty, 2004; Walden, 2006). The term "focus group" refers to a researcher interviewing several people at once. In other words, people sit in groups and discuss a specific topic chosen by the researcher. The participants control the contents of the discussion. The interviewer sets the focus in the session, but generally has relatively little control over the conversation (Trost, 2005). Participants can freely discuss the given topic. The goal is to explore perceptions, ideas, and values in a group of individuals and how their feelings can affect their behavior (Walden, 2006). PI-interviews are a new type of focus groups, developed together with young people. The PI interview introduces creative elements into the group's work (see Norberg, Yström & Brunnberg, 2008a; Norberg, Yström & Brunnberg, 2008b; Brunnberg, 2009).

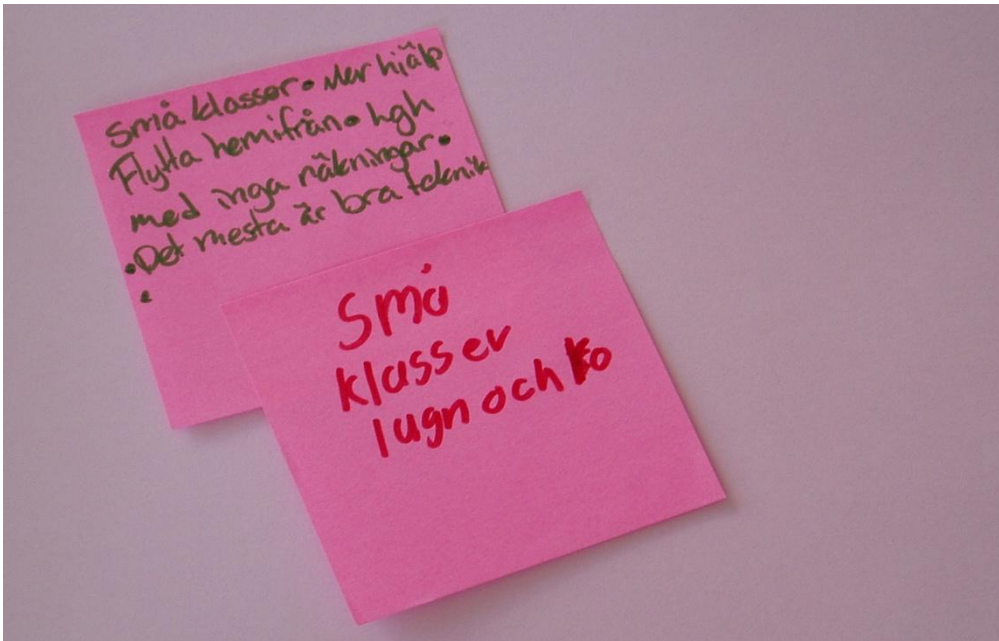
The interviewer/moderator leads the focus group and can sometimes intervene to support the interviewees so that all participants' views can come up. The moderator can also take action to deepen the discussion. Often an observer is present in the room. A tape recorder or video camera can be used to record the session. If no video recording is made, observers can make a sketch of the participants' positioning in the room to facilitate the subsequent process of analysis. The observer remains passive in the conversation but takes notes and makes observations about the group interaction, body language, etc. The number of participants in a focus group usually varies between four and twenty (McLafferty, 2004). The recommended number of participants is six to twelve (Walden, 2006). The number chosen can be influenced by the situation, the age of the participants, and the theme to be discussed. It can also be chosen to create a comfortable situation for the participants. Small and homogeneous groups tend to work better than heterogeneous groups (McLafferty, 2004).

The process in focus groups

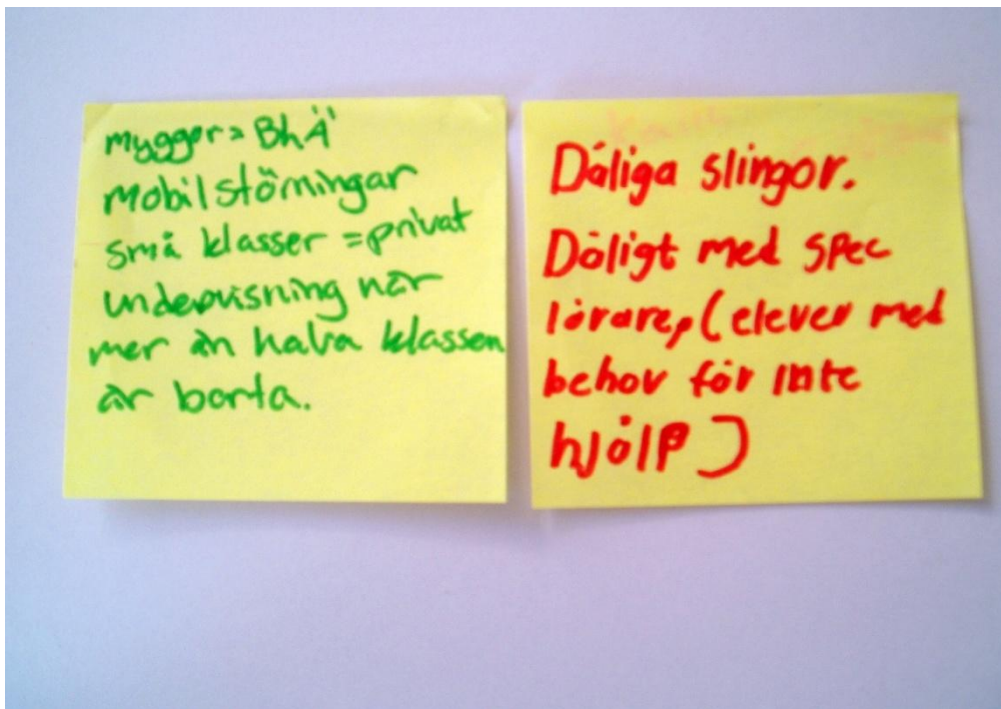
There are four components in the process of working with focus groups: 1) design and planning, 2) selection of participants, 3) carrying out the discussion session, 4) analyzing and reporting the results (Walden, 2006). The PI-interview has almost the same design and planning procedure. The participants are the same. PI-interviews are focus groups that include creative elements in the activities of the discussion sessions (see Norberg, Yström & Brunnberg, 2008a; Norberg, Yström & Brunnberg, 2008b). The sessions alternate between

individual and collective activities, and between writing and talking. In PI-interviews the session begins with a creative activity: all of the participants take two different colored Post-it notes and write something positive and something negative about the theme of the session. We call this a Plus & Minus mission. The focus groups also end with a creative activity phase concerning the future. The children are asked to think of a wish for the future that is related to the theme and to write it on two sunbeams; then the session is ended by making a sun out of all the participants' dreams about the future. The fourth component in the process of focus groups – analyzing and reporting – will mainly be the same as in traditional focus groups when the discussion is analyzed, however in the PI-interviews, the researcher also receives written documents such as Post-it notes and messages written on sunbeams.

Pink notes are positive and yellow are negative.



- 1) Small classes. More help. Moving out. Apartment but no bills. Mostly good. Technological advances.
- 2) Small classes. Peace and quiet.

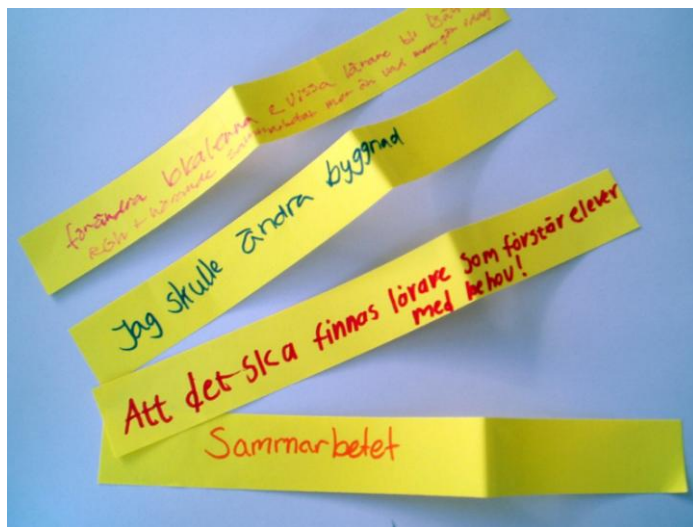


Negative

- 1) Myggor (a type of microphone) Blah! (really negative). Cell phone disturbances. Small classes = individual instruction when more than half the class is absent.
- 2) Bad listening loops. Few teachers with specialized qualifications (students with special needs do not get help)

The notes were then placed on a wall with an area of positive notes and an area of negative notes. This is so the students would be able to get an overview of what has been written and form their own view on current perceptions. Team leaders read the notes out loud and the group discussion began. The moderator had a thematic interview guide with him and if the group discussion did not concern any of these themes he could raise the theme with the group.

In the final stage of the focus group interview the participants received a new mission. The assignment was to draw a "future sun". This mission is similar to the Plus & Minus mission. Students were given two sunbeams each. On the beams the students briefly wrote what they most want future students to encounter when they start high school. The students were free to write whatever they wanted. The beams were then pasted onto a sun, and were shown to all the students. They started to discuss the contents and their hopes for the future.



Each focus group session took about an hour.

The PI interview was conducted in groups of 4 to 45 participants. Each PI interview took about an hour. There were often lively discussions. The participants' discussions were noted by an observer. The observer's notes, the Post-it notes, and the sunbeams (from the "Future sun") were cleaned up in a word-processing program and then categorized thematically.

Documentation

This focus group method, which we have chosen to call PI interviews with creative elements, emerged in a study of deaf and hard-of-hearing students. It is called PI-based interviews and is a method of visualization. Creative elements are used to open and close the session. The

creative introductory step quickly led to communication and discussion between students. All the young people were quick to check what the other participants considered important. At an early stage they all had to write both positive and negative perceptions and this provided a good balance in the forthcoming debate. Concerning interaction between participants, we noted that it differed somewhat between the younger and older groups of students. The younger students often had a clear leader in the group and often wrote the same as others in their notes, or they might write rogue comments. The older ones (17–20 year old) had no clear leader as the younger students seemed to have. The older students could write their comments more independently and with respect for each other's views. It is also worth noting that the vast majority of students began by writing on the positive Post-it note and saved the negative one for last. During the session, students were given a chance to provide brief personal commentary on the notes, and then join in the viewpoints expressed by others or deepen views held in common in the subsequent discussion.

The creative elements of the session made the discussion more open and also provided a fun and interesting way to end the focus group discussion. The subject of discussion was inspired by the Post-it notes. The young people were asked to write both positive and negative perceptions on the notes, so the leaders also provided guidance to obtain both positive and negative comments. The method became an excellent way to work with children. They found it stimulating and inspiring.

Writing on the Post-it notes gave the young people an opportunity to quickly get an idea of the central beliefs of the others without having to reveal their personal beliefs too openly. They themselves could control how personal they wanted to be in the presentation. This often led to very emotionally open and personal stories, but on an entirely voluntary basis. The creative elements, though very simple in their design, helped relax the interview situation. The Post-it notes also led to all the students' voices being heard and all of them taking part in the discussion, although the amount of time each one was active in the subsequent discussion varied.

Literature

- Brunnberg, Elinor (2009). *Tvåspråkigt projekt med mix av kvalitativ och kvantitativ metod. Studie med döva och hörselskadade ungdomar på svenska och svenskt teckenspråk*. Örebro: www.oru.se; www.dhb.se.
- Kitzinger, Jenny (1994). The methodology of focus groups: The importance of interaction between research participants. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 16: 1, ISSN 0141-9889
- McLafferty, Isabella (2004). Focus group interviews as a data collecting strategy. *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 48(2), 187–194
- Norberg, Maria Yström Gabriella, Brunnberg, Elinor (2008a) *Vi är en grupp fast två ändå. Elevers erfarenheter av Riksgymnasiet för döva och hörselskada*. Örebro: www.oru.se; www.dhb.se
- Norberg, Maria, Yström, Gabriella, Brunnberg, Elinor (2008b) *Sammanfattning. Vi är en grupp fast två ändå. Elevers erfarenheter av Riksgymnasiet för döva och hörselskada*. Örebro: DHB; Örebro universitet, ICU.
- Tinnfält, Agneta (2007). Fokusgrupper som forum för ungdomars diskussioner in Elinor Brunnberg & Elisabet Cedersund *Välfärdspolitik i Praktiken. Om perspektiv och metoder i forskning*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press/ NSU Press.
- Trost, Jan (2005) *Kvalitativa intervjuer*. Studentlitteratur AB
- Walden, Graham, (2006). CBQ Essay Review: Recent Books on Focus Group Interviewing and Mass Communication. *CBQ*, 37:2, 76–93.

