Evaluation Toolkit:

Top Tips for interviews and focus groups

Making Sense
of Media

Contents

Top Tips: Interviews and focus groups

Introduction

Interviews and focus groups are qualitative methods that can be used to gather information for evaluations. Interviews are useful for gathering in-depth information from individuals, while focus groups are useful for gathering collective views and generating ideas and recommendations. Both methods can provide valuable insights into an intervention's impact as well as providing learning about how the intervention could be improved.

In contrast to surveys and quizzes, qualitative methods allow people to explain things in their own words. This can deliver a deeper understanding of the participants' experience and what impact the invention has had, and how that relates to their everyday experiences and wider context. It makes it possible to gain a more holistic view, including any unintended consequences. And hearing about the impact in people's own words can be more compelling and can provide 'real-life' examples to illustrate the difference the intervention made, or help explain why it didn't achieve the expected impact.

Interviews and groups are typically conducted with a small subset of the participants in an intervention. You can either pick participants deliberately – choosing particular people to help you understand particular questions – or at random. Although you typically won't be able to involve everyone, you should seek to hear a range of viewpoints; it is vital that you do not just 'cherry-pick' the people who you believe will tell you what you want to hear, as this will reduce your credibility.

Often these methods are used alongside a survey or quiz, as qualitative data only enables you to report on self-reported improvement, which may be less compelling than quantitative evidence. However, having qualitative data to explain why an outcome was achieved (or not) can be a very valuable resource. You might also want to consider undertaking interviews or group discussions after a pilot of the intervention, so that you can get feedback on how it can be improved in case there are any 'quick wins' you can implement before the later sessions.

Key issues

- Create an environment where participants are likely to provide honest feedback. This could include having a different person leading the interviews than the person who ran the interventions.

- Interviews and groups are more time-consuming for participants than surveys. Consider whether this could limit the numbers who agree to participate, and think about whether you can offer anything to encourage or support them to participate (e.g. childcare).

- The conversation should flow easily; you don't necessarily need to ask all the questions as written in your guide and they don't need to be asked in the same order. However, it is vital that the questions are open and not leading, and this takes practice.

- Chose the most appropriate setting for the group – you can use the telephone, but Zoom or Teams (or face-to-face) can be helpful as you can see the respondent's body language.

- Put together a plan outlining how to handle any safeguarding disclosures and make sure your respondent knows whether you may have to break their confidentiality if you feel they are at risk of harm.

Choosing your methodology

As outlined above, you can interview people on their own, in pairs or in groups. Below are a few things that are useful to consider.

1. **What kind of data do you need to collect?** If the focus is on personal stories, individual experiences and learning, or covers a sensitive issue, interviews are likely to be better. If you want people to bounce ideas around and be creative, groups may be better.

2. **Who are you speaking with?** Children and young people can be sensitive in groups or interviews. On their own they might be nervous and find it hard to open up, but they could also feel like this in a large group. Therefore, paired interviews (with someone they know, such as someone else from the workshop) can be a good solution.

3. **Online or in-person?** The advantages of in-person are that you can set tasks easily and read people's body language. If you choose to do a group online, make sure that anyone nervous about the software has a chance to try it out in advance so they know it will work on the day, and try to use software that people are familiar with already and that doesn't need to be downloaded.

4. **How many people to speak with?** As interviews are more time-consuming than quantitative surveys, you will typically connect with fewer people, but in more depth. If you want to report on the experiences of people with different characteristics, you would ideally have at least four in-depth interviews, or two groups, with people who have that characteristic. A small evaluation should ideally involve at least six interviews, while a minimum of three groups is advised.

5. **What experience does the researcher have?** Interviews are typically easier to handle than groups and are therefore lower risk. Ideally, you wouldn't do either without some appropriate training or by working with a trained interviewer. If you choose to do interviews, you will have more separate interactions so one unsuccessful interview will not be as problematic.

Note that for groups you would ideally have no more than eight participants in a room, or six participants online at once. If there are more people than this, split them into two or more smaller groups, so that everyone has a chance to have their say. Putting people with similar characteristics (e.g. the same age, gender etc) in the same group can be a good idea as they will have some common ground.

Analysis

It's important to have a plan to guide the conversation and ensure that you can gather the information you need. This can be achieved by creating an interview discussion guide, which helps the facilitator to ask relevant and focused questions and to keep the conversation on track. However, unlike in a survey, you should use this as a guide rather than a script, and where possible you should reflect the language that people use themselves.

There are some general guidelines for developing a topic guide:

- Always start with an easy question that people will be able to answer (and if in a group setting, make sure everyone answers, so they all get a chance to speak in the first few minutes).

- Start with broad questions and then zoom in for more detail on specific areas.

- Once you've asked some overarching questions, try to anticipate a logical flow so that the conversation makes sense to the participant (e.g. start at the beginning of their experience).

- Make sure you end on a positive note so that the respondents don't leave on a low point.

Example interview topic guide

This is an example of a topic guide, created for the fictional organisation Digital Sleuth Club to ask pupils after participation in its workshops. It provides some examples of the types of questions that you might want to ask participants after one of your interventions.

The example is for an interview. A topic guide for a group might cover similar topics but it should be longer so everyone has time to talk, and it should have more prompts so that you remember to ask whether other people had different views/experiences. It's important not to ask: "Does everyone agree?" as this is very leading. It's better to say: "How do other people feel?" or to bring in specific people by name: "How about you, Jeff?"

Introduction (5-10 mins)

Explain who the interviewer is, the purpose of the interview (to capture honest feedback), how the data will be captured (e.g. paper notes, audio or video recorded), stored, used and deleted.

Make it clear whether identifiable information will be passed on where necessary, for safeguarding.

Reassure people that there are no right/wrong answers but that you are interested in what they have to say. Clarify that you are evaluating the intervention, not the participant.

You should also remind them they can choose not to answer a specific question, or stop participating at any time, with no consequences.

You may also wish to signpost them to sources of support if you think this will be helpful.

Ask them if they have any questions. Ask for consent to continue (and check that you have parental consent if required). It can be really tempting to rush this bit to get to 'the important stuff'. However, how you explain the purpose of the interview/group sets the tone and it is vital that you give the participant(s) time to understand and process what you are saying

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Example: Introduction / ice-breaker (5 mins)

Please tell me a bit about what you like doing online.

Prompt if needed:

- What websites / apps do they use? [probe on specific sites if relevant]
- What do they use them for?
- How much time do they spend doing these things?
- If not mentioned: how much time do they spend looking at the news online?

Choose an easy question to get them started. Give them time to speak and don't interrupt too much as this could be off-putting.

However, if you get someone who is very quiet, make sure you have lots of ideas for follow-up prompts just in case. If you don't need to use the prompts, that's fine.

Overview of the intervention (10 mins)

Now I'd like you to tell me about the workshop you took part in.

Firstly, what are the main things that stood out (if anything) from the workshop? Why?

Prompt (if needed):

- What are the things you remember?
- What did you learn (if anything)?

Is there anything in particular you learned that you wish you had known sooner? Why?

Prompt (if needed):

- What happened because you didn't know this thing before today?
- How likely is it to happen again in the future?

Would you recommend the workshop to your friends/ family? Why/why not?

Prompt (if needed):

- What sort of people do you think would benefit most from the workshop?
- What previous knowledge would they need?

Before exploring the process in detail, it's helpful to get an overview of what the participant thought of the session overall and what they took away from it.

The question on 'what they wish they'd known sooner' is to try to capture how the learning applies to real-life situations that the participant has been exposed to in the past.

It's great to teach someone how to spot an investment scam, but if they've never seen one/ shown interest in one, the impact of the intervention is likely to be relatively low).

Detailed walk-through (15 mins)

I'd now like to go back to the beginning and talk this through step by step.

How did you find out about the workshop?

Why did you choose to attend?

Prompt (if needed)

- What did you hope to get out of it?
- Did you consider other options?

And can you tell me a bit about your experience on the day?

Prompt (if needed)

- Whether or not the workshop lived up to your expectations (why / why not)?
- Whether they got what they wanted out of the session (why / why not)?

What were the main things you learned? What else? Anything else?

Prompt (if needed and only after they run out of ideas)

- Media literacy skills (lateral reading, critical thinking, source verification, fact-checking etc.)
- Reasons information is inaccurate online (financial, political, personal, etc.)
- How to identify bias
- How information / content can be designed to elicit an emotional response
- How the internet is personalised by algorithms (filter bubbles) and how these can feed into your personal biases

Note that these prompts link directly back to the short-term outcomes identified in the theory of change. If there are a lot of outcomes you may want to select only the main ones as prompts, as otherwise the interview could feel very heavy going for the participant – they will tell you the main things they learned unprompted, and this is likely to be the most useful information for you.

What words would you use to describe the workshop? You can be as creative as you like!
Please explain why you picked these words…

In addition to direct questions, it can be helpful, once the participant has warmed up, to ask more creative questions, such as asking them to choose words or draw a picture. This will help them to move away from a rational mindset and to talk more about feelings and emotions, which are equally important. It also can change the energy and make the interview more interesting.

If you include such exercises, it is important that you introduce the task unapologetically; there is a risk that if you (or your body language) imply that the exercise could be embarrassing/ difficult to do, the participants will feel your discomfort and won't be confident themselves. It's fine to reassure them that you're not a great artist and don't expect them to be either.

Longer-term impacts (10 mins)

These prompts link to the intermediate impacts in the theory of change. If the attendees are asked immediately after a workshop, this will require then to speculate in their answers.

It is better if you can return to them a month or more after the workshop, to ask them what is happening now they are back in the 'real world'.

Remember to ask about things that didn't work, as well as those that did, so you get a full picture of how your intervention worked and how it could be improved.

Wrap-up (5 mins)

I would now like you to write a postcard to the funder of this workshop to tell them what you thought of it. You can include anything you think they would want to know.

Prompt if needed: it could be about what you learned that was useful, what difference you think it will make, or how the session could be improved. Whatever you think, it's very important for them to hear.

That's all my questions. Is there anything else you would like to add?

It's helpful to allow time to wind down at the end and make sure people have a last chance to say what they think is important. The postcard exercise can work very well if you are meeting in person and let them write it on the spot – again, this will require them to engage in a different way than if they just speak the answer. However, if that isn't practical then you can ask them to think of any message they want to share; they can dictate it to you.

If the interview covers any sensitive issues, you should include giving details for further support in your wrap-up. If something unexpected comes up and you don't know where to direct the person concerned, you can either suggest they speak to an appropriate organisation (have a list prepared in advance), or if they prefer, promise to get back to them.

Things to consider

Do:

- Gain the consent of your participants to take part in the interview/group.

- Think about the demographic information that would be useful to obtain for the purposes of analysis and only ask for what you need.

- Link the prompts to outcomes of interest, but let people speak in their own words first and reflect this in the analysis.

- Make it clear to your participants that they are not being 'tested' (particularly when working with children and young people.)

- Use different exercises to bring energy to the session (thinking of words or images, writing a post-card or designing a poster, working in pairs etc) once people are settled in.

- Listen carefully to what people tell you and ask follow-up questions for clarification.

- Keep in mind that if you are interviewing a child, it could be helpful to have a second adult in the room for safeguarding purposes. They can also help by taking notes.

Don't:

- Ask leading questions or include assumptions in your questions

- Tell the participant what you think (either verbally or with your body language), especially if you disagree.

- Spend too long on warm-up questions and then run over time, rush the last questions or not get to the end.

- Challenge or correct people - especially early in the interview/group. However, once they have built their confidence you can do this sparingly if you think it will be helpful.