

Best Practices for Focus Groups and Interviews for SoTL projects

Presented by:

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Agenda

Part 1: Choosing a method

- Strengths and challenges of focus groups and interviews

Part 2: Running the session

- Organizing and ensuring a smooth focus group or interview
- Navigating potential issues
- Ethical considerations

Part 3: Data analysis

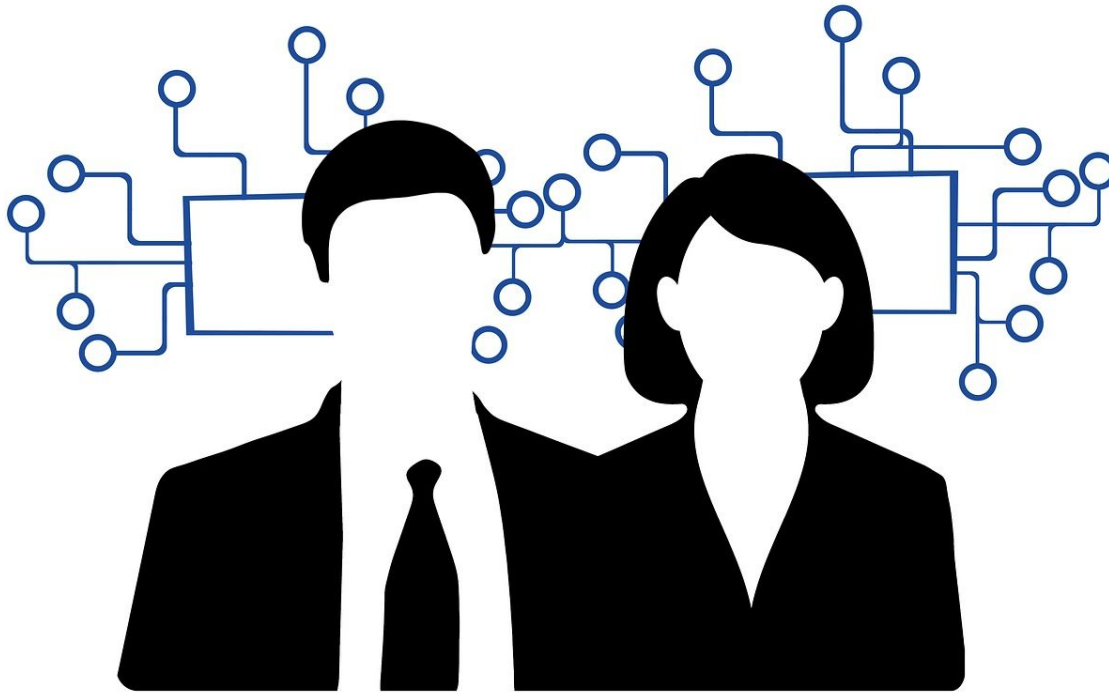
- Preparing your data
- Data coding



What brought you to today's session?



Part 1: Choosing a method



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Source: <https://pixabay.com/illustrations/people-businessman-businesswoman-3402393/>

Deciding on a method

Good SoTL is “methodologically sound ... regardless of the methods employed, good practice in SoTL requires the intentional and rigorous application of research tools that connect the question at the heart of a particular inquiry”
(Felten, 2013, p. 123).

Think carefully about what data collection method will **best** help you get information to answer your questions. Consider:

- Your research/evaluation questions
- What evidence/data do you need to answer your questions?
- Resources and timeline



Why do focus groups or interviews?

- There is a research/evaluation question that involves complexity/depth
- An opportunity to gather reflections/feedback/insights on specific topics
- Your project would benefit from descriptions, examples, stories (narratives)



Internal and external validity

- **Internal validity:** “the degree of confidence we have that our treatment causes the effect”
- **External validity:** “the degree of confidence we have that we can generalize from our study to the larger context”
 - Generalizability can differ in scope: to another section of the same class, another course in the same discipline, the same topic across discipline, the same pedagogical approach

SoTL is the marriage of these two concepts: describing a rich context for the work/practice with as much control as we are capable of (**internal validity**) and “allowing the practice to advance outside our individual classroom” by generalizing so others can learn from our work (**external validity**)

Strengths and challenges of focus groups

Strengths

- Can gather data from more people than 1:1 interviews
- Reveals social interactions and allows for social discussions (e.g., consensus/agreement or disagreement on topics)

Challenges

- Power hierarchy can leave out certain voices (social coercion)
- Lack of anonymity because sharing in a group
 - Sensitive topics may not be shared
- Data analysis



Strengths and challenges of interviews

Strengths

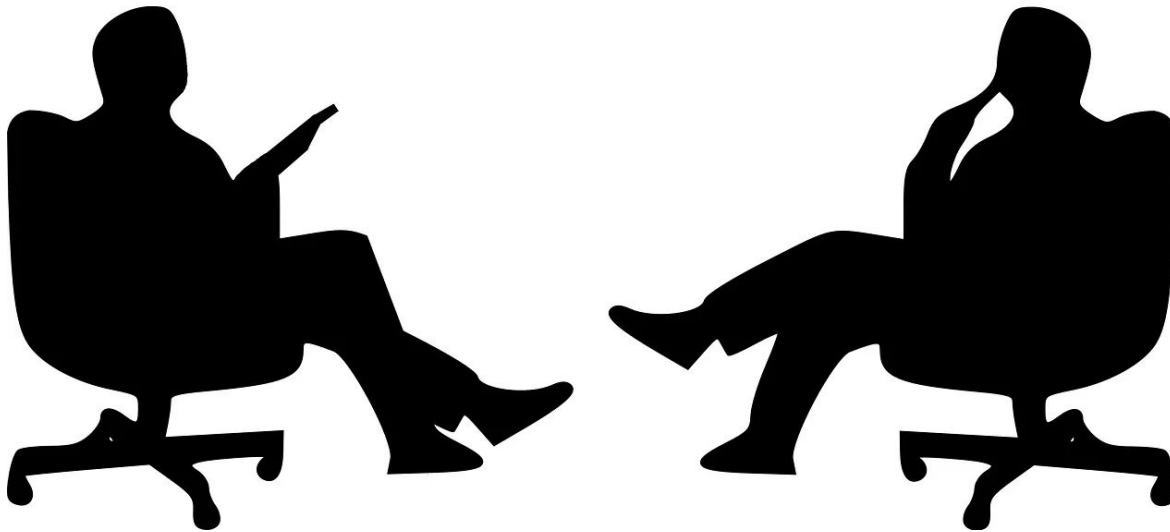
- Allows for introspective, personal experiences of a participant
 - Especially useful if you have concerns that participant might be inhibited to share if others are present
- Space for honest responses / conversations with participants

Challenges

- Power hierarchy can be intimidating for some participants (may not be willing to share certain information)
- Time intensive - may need several interviews before research question is addressed
- Data analysis



Part 2: Running the session



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Source: <https://pixabay.com/illustrations/interview-conversation-sitting-2071228/>



Organizing focus groups and interviews

- **Recruitment**

- Clearly explain why this work is being done to promote interest in participating
- A direct invitation addressed to potential participants makes it feel personal
- Identify an ideal timeline based on your research/evaluation question(s)
 - Avoid busy times (e.g., midterms, finals)
 - Offer multiple time options
- Offer the right incentives (e.g. gift cards, refreshments)



Organizing focus groups and interviews

- **Logistics**

- Number of sessions vs number of participants in each session
- Duration: no longer than 60 min
- Location: Virtual vs. in-person, proximity
- Participant groupings can impact the conversation

- **Prepare**

- A well-thought out protocol that speaks directly to your research questions
- Number of questions depends on number of participants and session length (3-4 questions / 30 min is a good estimate)
- Probes in case people are shy to talk

- **Facilitation**

- Record session and take notes
- Two facilitators, when possible
- Be mindful of ethics and power dynamics



Ensuring a smooth session

- **Before the session:**

- Always book the room for at least 15 minutes before and after the session (if in person)
- Confirm with participants 24 hours prior, make sure the room number and time are clearly communicated
- Don't panic if only 1-2 participants show up
 - Cancelling it won't be fair to those who may have had to commute far to get to campus, cancel other plans, etc.



Ensuring a smooth session

- **During the session:**

- Go over the project goals, the purpose of the session and how data will be used
- Be transparent about your role in the project
- Inform session will be recorded
- Offer opportunities to ask questions
- Considerations for online interviews or focus groups

- **After the session:**

- Offer chance to connect with you if they have anything else to share or want to review



Navigating potential issues

- Stick to the script – the questions, not the order necessarily
- Don't be afraid to redirect participants back to the questions
 - Ask for clarification and examples as needed
- Make sure all voices get heard
 - Invite everyone to speak; provide name tags if in person
- Don't talk too much! Let participants do the talking



Principles of research ethics



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Source: <https://www.picpedia.org/chalkboard/e/ethics.html>

Sample consent forms: <https://isotl.ctlt.ubc.ca/resources/resource-hub/>

Guide for deciding if you need to pursue institutional ethics: <https://isotl.ctlt.ubc.ca/breb-application/>



Principles of research ethics

- Voluntary participation, informed consent
 - Explain purpose openly and honestly
 - Provide opportunities to ask questions
- Confidentiality and anonymity
 - Personal information stays confidential
 - Only the facilitator will know actual names, be clear that identifying info not be publically reported
 - Keep recordings on a password protected computer and/or UBC supported storage (e.g., One Drive)



Part 3: Data analysis



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Analyzing your data

- Prepare your dataset for analysis
 - Transcription vs notes
- Data coding
 - Inductive: develop themes based on the data
 - Deductive: use a developed codebook and apply these themes to the data
- **Thematic coding** is a common approach to focus group and interview data – it asks: What are the common threads in the data? What are the common themes emerging?
- **Content analysis** focuses on the occurrence or frequency of concepts or keywords.
- **Narrative analysis** helps identify larger themes from the data - focuses on stories
- **Discourse analysis** explores language in context, culture and society and power relations



Thematic Analysis

- 1) Get to know your data.
- 2) Create a coding scheme.
- 3) Code the data.
- 4) Discuss responses with a colleague and re-code as necessary.
- 5) Create summaries based on the coding results.
- 6) Reflect on how this analysis relates to the research question(s) and determine what the major findings are.



Data tools

- NVivo
 - A good management system for organizing files and codes
 - But the codes come from you (human-generated)
- Excel is also a great tool for organizing qualitative data

The screenshot shows the NVivo software interface. The main window displays a list of interview sources under the heading 'Alle intervju'. The table below shows the details of these sources:

Name	Nodes	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
ANN IREN	0	0	22.10.2010 15:23	WS	22.10.2010 15:23	WS
CAROLA	0	0	22.10.2010 15:23	WS	22.10.2010 15:23	WS
ELIN 0601	0	0	22.10.2010 15:23	WS	22.10.2010 15:23	WS
HENRIK 0	0	0	22.10.2010 15:23	WS	22.10.2010 15:23	WS
MATHILDE	1	1	22.10.2010 15:23	WS	28.10.2010 17:08	WS
SIV 08.01.	0	0	22.10.2010 15:23	WS	22.10.2010 15:23	WS

The text view for the 'MATHILDE' source shows the following content:

S: Ikke i utgangspunktet, fordi jeg er så lite kjent med korsen det egentlig har vært. Og korsen det fungerer som det er –

I: Men korsen –

S: Men jeg synes – men jeg synes jo det de har gjort nå, med at du får ei stor gruppe med mer individuell tid, skal vi si – og litt mer sånne individ tilpassa – ikke bare dette her med rene grupper – det høres jo positivt ut.

I: Ja.

S: Så jeg er spent på det – Så jeg har ikke gjort meg noe voldsomt – altså, jeg ville jo kjørt dette her løpet ei stund og sett korsen det har gått –

I: Men altså - du har ikke noen ideer som du synes det må bare gjøre - det er et uttrykk for at du synes det går ganske bra sånne som det er? Det er ikke noe som er utrygg?

S: Ja, jeg tror nå egentlig det....

I: Altså hvis jeg får en slik tilbakemelding, så må jo det ha vært godt sånne som det var og sånne som det kommer til å bli –

S: Ja –



Resources

- [Focus group and Interviews handout \(PDF\)](#)
- [Browse SoTL tips and resources](#)
- [Articles on common SoTL methodologies](#)
- [An Introduction to Thematic Analysis](#)

- Krueger, R.A. & Casey, M.A. (2009). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Maguire, M., & Delahunt, B. (2017). Doing a thematic analysis: A practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *All Ireland Journal of Higher Education*, 9(3).
- Xu, W., & Zammit, K. (2020). Applying thematic analysis to education: A hybrid approach to interpreting data in practitioner research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19, 1609406920918810.
- Welsh, A. J. (2012). Exploring Undergraduates' Perceptions of the Use of Active Learning Techniques in Science Lectures. *Journal of College Science Teaching*, 42(2), 80–87.



Thank you!

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