

Ayobami P. Adekola¹ 

Azwihangwisi H. Mavhandu-Mudzusi² 

AFFILIATIONS

¹ & ² University of South Africa

Copyright:

© The Author(s) 2024.

Published by ERRCD Forum.

This is an open access book distributed under Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence.

REFERENCE

Adekola, A. P. & Mavhandu-Mudzusi, A. H. (2024). Focus-group Teaching in Classrooms. In E. O. Adu, B. I. Omodan, C. T. Tsotetsi, & B. Damoah (Eds.), *Pedagogical strategies for 21st-century classrooms* (pp. 59-65). ERRCD Forum. <https://doi.org/10.38140/obp1-2024-09>

9.1. Concept Map

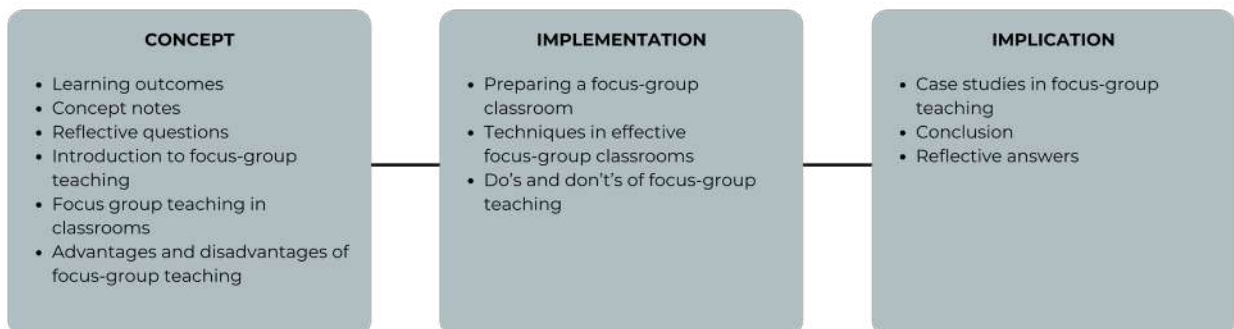


Figure 9.1: Concept Map

9.2. Learning Outcomes

- Readers or teachers should be able to perform the following tasks after carefully reading this chapter:
- Understand and define focus-group teaching in the classroom.
- Articulate the advantages and limitations of the focus-group teaching strategy.
- Identify learning content areas where focus-group teaching strategies can be effectively utilised.
- Identify various techniques for implementing focus-group teaching in the classroom.
- Prepare lessons that incorporate focus-group teaching strategies
- Adequately prepare for focus-group teaching sessions in the classroom to meet the learning needs of students.
- Effectively manage focus-group teaching sessions in the classroom.
- Contextually evaluate what worked and what did not work during focus-group teaching in the classroom.

9.3. Concept Notes

This chapter presents focus-group teaching as a creative and innovative approach to facilitating learner-centred teaching in the classroom. It describes the concepts, elements, and practical applications of focus groups in teaching, along with their advantages, disadvantages, stages of implementation, challenges, and anticipated learning outcomes. The goal is to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills to transform learners from passive recipients into active participants in their learning journey. The chapter also highlights the benefits and relevance of focus-group teaching, supplemented by case studies demonstrating its effective implementation.

Historically, the focus-group strategy has been successfully used in qualitative research, with Robert Merton recognised as the pioneer of this technique (Morgan, 2022). Ernest Dichter coined the term “focus group” in 1991 (Ames, 1998). Initially employed in market research, focus groups have become valuable tools across various fields, including public health, education, social sciences, and communication studies (Morgan, 1996).

In 21st-century schools, classroom activities should stimulate active learner participation in their learning processes. Focus-group teaching, a learner-centred, participatory, and collaborative method, enhances communication and engagement on specific topics (Anderson, 1995). Its democratic nature ensures equal opportunities for all learners to contribute to classroom discussions. There is a demand for a more innovative, effective, and efficient teaching strategy in schools due to the known drawbacks of traditional teaching methods, such as restricting students to specific content and fostering teacher dependence. Traditional methods hinder learners from developing self-learning skills and impede the development of higher cognitive skills. Additionally, traditional teaching methods may discourage problem-solving and inquiry-based learning and do not support learners in developing context-adaptability abilities such as communication, interpersonal relations, motivation, and facilitation skills. These disadvantages of the traditional teaching approach underscore the need for every learner in a classroom to be active during the learning process so that no learner is left behind during lessons (Patel-Junankar, 2021). Teachers have expressed the need for schools to change traditional teaching methods that treat learners as passive recipients of knowledge (BizCommunity, 2019). The same report argues that teachers act as information transmitters instead of creating active learning spaces for learners.

There are many learner-centred approaches that can be used to achieve learning outcomes in the classroom. One such method for efficiently facilitating the learning process is focus-group teaching. The quest to improve tuition and pedagogical processes in the classroom demands the use of new approaches and the application of well-tested strategies to advance teaching and learning.

Why do we need focus-group teaching?

Focus-group teaching offers teachers valuable insights into their strategies by allowing learners to share their perspectives on what helps or hinders their learning. This approach helps identify effective teaching methods and areas that need improvement, making it a useful diagnostic tool. Learners actively participate in their learning by reflecting on classroom experiences, teaching resources, and learning environments, which can enhance teachers’ pedagogical effectiveness. Teachers can apply this method when taking on a new class or teaching a subject for the first time, using learners’ feedback to refine their approach and improve inclusivity in the classroom.

9.4 Introduction To Focus-group Teaching

Focus-group teaching is a powerful approach that allows teachers and learners to listen to and learn from each other on a particular topic of interest. Liamputtong (2011) argues that this method is suitable for collaborative and mutual learning among a group of people. The teacher’s responsibility is not to direct the discussion but to facilitate it. All learners’ perceived meanings and interpretations of a topic or phenomenon of interest are treated as important and relevant. This teaching strategy is useful for exploring and examining what learners think about the topic, the teaching style, or the learning process in the classroom. Its peculiarity lies in providing each learner with the power to engage meaningfully from their perspectives. The attention of the learners as a group is focused on learning content, pedagogical processes, learning approaches, or any issue where they share common experiences through discussion, debate, or reflection on the issue at stake. This approach allows teachers who opt for it to gain an in-depth understanding of the topic from the learners’ perspectives. Creating a friendly, non-threatening, comfortable, non-judgmental, and permissive classroom atmosphere is crucial for the successful implementation of focus-group teaching.

While consensus may not necessarily be attained, this teaching approach can elicit rich, detailed, and useful thoughts, opinions, feelings, knowledge, perspectives, and impressions from learners, articulated in their own words on the topics of interest.

9.5 Focus-group Teaching In Classrooms

In classrooms, focus group teaching techniques foster interaction among learners who are allowed to discuss planned topics of interest in detail. This method is suitable for relatively small classes, but larger classrooms can be divided into groups. Various studies recommend that the size of each focus group should be between six and twelve learners (Graham, 2022; Trinity College Dublin, 2019). During the focus group teaching session, healthy interactions between the learners and the teacher, as facilitator, can help clarify and explore their viewpoints on the topics being discussed. The success of focus group teaching depends significantly on the teacher's skills in planning and facilitating the lessons. Furthermore, when introducing a topic, the teacher needs to guide the process in a way that encourages learners' participation without making any learner feel targeted or excluded. Time management and classroom control skills are essential for productive and beneficial focus group teaching. It is critical that both learners and teachers view the focus group teaching technique as an opportunity for new learning experiences. As a result, the classroom is transformed into a learning space in which learners and teachers mutually learn from one another about the topics under discussion. After each focus group classroom session, learners' feedback and concerns should be taken seriously and addressed to improve subsequent focus group learning and teaching sessions.

9.7. Advantages And Disadvantages Of Focus-group Teaching

Focus-group teaching strategies offer appealing pedagogical options for teachers to enhance the learning process in the classroom. We will discuss the advantages and drawbacks of this teaching approach.

Advantages

Adopting the focus-group teaching technique is mutually beneficial for both teachers and learners. Due to its learner-centred nature, focus-group teaching provides a unique opportunity for learners and teachers to actively share knowledge on the same topic in the classroom, with most contributions coming from the learners. Other advantages include:

- It enhances learners' communication abilities and self-independence, enabling them to hone their public speaking skills and expand their understanding of the topic.
- It fosters problem-solving skills, allowing learners to think quickly and present their perspectives or solutions.
- It promotes collaborative learning and teamwork among learners.
- It trains learners to listen to one another, learn from each other, and respect their peers' opinions.
- It provides an exciting and motivating learning environment, as each learner can take ownership of their learning process without leaving anyone behind.
- It may increase learners' interest in the topic and potentially in the subject as a whole.
- It may help learners prepare for lessons by providing pre-lesson exercises. An individual who wishes to contribute during the session may be motivated to prepare by completing these exercises.
- It provides teachers with meaningful and valuable feedback on the discussed topic, which can guide them in planning and conducting appropriate interventions.
- It allows teachers to uncover new problem-solving approaches and ideas through learners' input.
- Overall, it could enhance teachers' reflective abilities and introduce them to new skills, such as data analysis.

Disadvantages

Despite the discussed benefits of focus-group teaching, it is important to know its disadvantages. It requires the facilitating teacher to be skilled and have good classroom management abilities. This is necessary because a focus-group lesson could be disruptive if planning and implementation are not well managed. Several learners may want to contribute to the discussion simultaneously, leading to chaotic engagement and loss of concentration, and teachers may have trouble controlling the learners. Other drawbacks of focus-group teaching include:

- Teachers may not easily identify learners who are struggling or who may not understand the topic being discussed.

- Time constraints mean that the allocated time for the lesson may not be sufficient for all the learners to make an in-depth contribution to the topic of interest.
- It may not be suitable for all concepts and topics, so the teachers will have to predetermine which topic they would like to use focus-group teaching for (Smithson, 2008).
- Learners with aggressive or domineering personalities may considerably influence the direction of the topic being discussed if the teacher does not manage them properly.
- Possible unintended consequences include learners' emotional discomfort, withdrawal, and trauma.
- Some learners may go along with the general opinions rather than express their own views.
- It requires teachers to be skilled in facilitation and possibly qualitative data analysis.

Consequently, teachers need relevant training to acquire the skills to reflect on and analyse the information provided by the learners. Their feedback could deepen the learners' understanding of the discussed topic. Despite its apparent disadvantages, the benefits of well-implemented focus-group teaching in a classroom are tremendous and worthwhile.

9.8 Preparing A Focus-group Classroom

Every teacher requires an adequate lesson plan to efficiently facilitate the learning process in the classroom (Iqbal et al., 2021). Pre-lesson preparation is critical to the success of focus-group teaching. During lesson preparation, the teacher must formulate the goals of the planned lesson, the learning objectives, and the topic to be discussed. The aim could be diagnostic or evaluative, to obtain feedback on the learning process, receive learners' perspectives on an issue, or serve any other purpose. If applicable, a guide to pre-lesson activities, such as reading and watching video clips on the planned topic, should be made available to learners.

Furthermore, the planning should specify how the teacher will run the session. The teacher may opt for a larger venue, such as the school hall, if the classroom is smaller and unsuitable for focus-group teaching, ensuring that the group size remains manageable for effective participation. A larger venue should be selected to provide comfortable seating and allow for free expression among participants rather than solely to accommodate a larger group. The planning should detail how many learners will be in each group. The preparation should include information on venue set-up, seating arrangements, equipment, the definition and assignment of roles, how the session will be recorded, and post-lesson reflections, analysis, and feedback. Furthermore, a facilitator guide containing open-ended questions about the topic of interest should be developed. The lesson plan should be flexible and responsive to accommodate possible unforeseen circumstances. For instance, changes can be made to the group arrangement if there is unexpected absenteeism or a need to move learners around to ensure that some learners are comfortable or to prevent potential disruptive behaviour if some learners are placed together in the same groups.

9.9 Effective Techniques In Focus-group Classrooms

Once a workable lesson preparation has been established and a suitable venue selected, the teacher should communicate the lesson's purpose, importance, expectations, and ground rules to the learners. The teacher must clearly explain the lesson objectives, highlighting what information is needed from the learners, how they should share it, and how the collected information will be used. Following this, learners should have the opportunity to ask clarifying questions regarding the topic, class procedures, the lesson itself, and any concerns they may have. At the start of the lesson, learners should be informed of the time allocated for their responses and participation in the discussion. For instance, a guideline such as the "2x4 protocol" can be implemented, depending on the number of learners and the time available, whereby each contributing learner speaks for two minutes and then waits for another four participants to contribute before making additional comments. This approach will help prevent any individual from dominating the group discussion.

Some of the ground rules for focus-group teaching in a classroom could include, but are not limited to:

- Learners' contribution is voluntary.
- There is no answer that is wrong or right.
- Respect others' opinions, even if you disagree with them.
- Each learner's contributions should be made within the allocated time.
- Stay focused on the topic of discussion.
- Non-disclosure of personal details - respect and protect one another's privacy.

Furthermore, learners should aim to understand other learners' contributions rather than imposing their own perspectives during discussions. A consensus may not be reached, and it is normal to agree to disagree. Learners should bring their writing materials with them, as this will allow them to formulate their ideas and thoughts before contributing to the topic being discussed. Each learner can start by briefly mentioning their name before making their contributions. The facilitator must use probes and prompts to elicit information from the contributing learners while encouraging other learners to participate without putting them under undue pressure. During focus-group teaching, the teacher has an important responsibility to continuously gauge, monitor, and note the dynamics of the focus group and the non-verbal cues of the learners, as this will help the teacher analyse and interpret the information collected from the learners and provide meaningful feedback to them. The analysis of the information obtained from the learners should be done as quickly as feasible; we propose completing it within 24 hours of holding a focus-group lesson and then sharing the information obtained during the process with the learners.

9.10 Dos And Don'ts in Focus-group Teaching

The teacher implementing focus-group teaching should be aware of the best practices for facilitation to optimise its benefits for both learners and teachers. These best practices will be divided into two categories: "dos" and "don'ts."

"Dos" In Focus-group Teaching

- Create a relaxed, non-threatening, and fun classroom atmosphere to make all the learners comfortable.
- The lesson should be learner-centred, where the discussion is promoted amongst learners and the teacher listens.
- Keep all the discussions on track with the goals of the focus teaching group.
- Know the focus-group guide questions by heart.
- Record learners' contributions verbatim, including all non-verbal cues from both the speaking and listening learners.
- Use open-ended questions.
- Clarify with learners that their thoughts and perspectives are accurately captured.
- Respect learners' diversity

"Don'ts" In Focus-group Teaching

- Do not be dominating, defensive, threatening, or judgmental to ensure proper implementation.
- Do not question the learners' ideas.
- Avoid reading questions from the books as it could affect learners' active learning.
- Avoid sharing personal opinions, biases, beliefs, and views verbally or through body language when facilitating.
- Do not exhibit favouritism or deviate from the objectives and established ground rules.
- Do not allow a few learners to dominate or influence class focus group discussions, nor permit distracting side conversations. Do not presuppose, assume, or predict learners' replies, and do not actively endorse any party in the event of disagreement.
- Avoid using a large vocabulary that might interfere with the learners' understanding of the topic being discussed in the focus group class.

9.11 Case Studies In Focus-group Teaching

Rigorous and thoughtful preparation is a key requirement, regardless of the teacher's intended purpose. A well-defined learning objective must be clearly stated and communicated to the learners. In addition, pre-lesson activities such as reading, watching relevant video clips, and engaging with other materials related to the planned topic should be provided. Below are case studies of focus-group teaching methods used in the classroom. All sessions were audio recorded after obtaining written consent from the learners.

Case Study One

Aim: To assess learners' knowledge of HIV prevention during a Grade 11 Life Orientation lesson. With all the necessary preparation for a focus-group class in place, I asked learners a central question: "In what ways can HIV transmission be prevented?"

This was followed by prompting and probing questions such as “Could you please tell me more?” “Any other way?”

The collected information was processed, and feedback from the lesson was given to the learners.

Case Study Two

Aim: To elicit innovative ideas from learners in Grade 9 on building hydraulic system projects during Technology class.

Learners were given pre-lesson activities to prepare for a focus-group lesson. These activities included reading about hydraulic systems, watching a YouTube video, and asking knowledgeable relatives and friends for relevant information. Other preparatory and introductory protocols were also observed. A central question was posed: “How would you design and build a hydraulic system?”

This was followed by prompting and probing questions such as, “Why did you prefer this method?” and “Are there other methods?”

After this focus-group lesson, learners found it easier to complete their project tasks, as it helped them identify whom to consult among themselves. Additionally, it fostered strong friendships among the learners.

Case Study Three

Aim: To obtain feedback from learners about mathematics Euclidean geometry lessons in a school.

Background: I conducted a focus group session for my Grade 11 mathematics class to gather feedback on the series of lessons on Euclidean geometry before moving on to a new topic. This will aid in planning an effective and tailored revision for the learners on the subject. The learners were divided into three groups of ten in a conducive venue. They were welcomed, and the purpose, ground rules, and procedures were communicated. I posed a central question: “Describe your experience regarding the Euclidean geometry lessons we have had over the past two weeks.”

This was followed by prompting and probing questions such as, “Why did you find it easy or difficult?” “Can you mention the aspects you find easy or difficult and explain why?” “How can you be helped to improve your understanding of this topic?”

9.12 Conclusion

This chapter explores focus-group teaching, highlighting its qualitative properties that enhance collaborative learning. We discuss how this learner-centred approach can be applied for diagnostics, evaluation, feedback, needs assessment, idea generation, problem identification, and problem-solving across various subjects. We outline key “dos” and “don’ts”, as well as advantages and drawbacks, supported by case studies to guide classroom implementation. We argue that the benefits of focus-group teaching outweigh its challenges. Therefore, teachers, with the support of school managers, should anticipate and address potential lesson-planning challenges to maximise the effectiveness of this strategy.

9.13 Reflective Questions

1. Why do you, as a teacher, need to understand focus-group teaching techniques?
2. What are the key skills and resources needed to implement focus-group teaching in your classroom?
3. What are the possible challenges you face as a teacher that may prevent you from implementing focus-group teaching in your school?
4. How do you think these challenges can be addressed?
5. What subject areas or topics in your field would you consider for focus-group teaching?
6. Describe how focus-group teaching will improve your teaching skills as a teacher.

9.14. References

- Ames, L. (1998). The View From/Peekskill; Tending the Flame of a Motivator. *The New York Times*, 2.
- Andersen, J. (1995). *Courageous teaching: Creating a caring community in the classroom*. Corwin Press, Inc.
- BizCommunity. (2019, November 4). SA needs to move away from traditional teaching methods. Bizcommunity. <https://www.bizcommunity.com/Article/196/498/189692.html>

- Graham, D. (2022, September 7). How many focus groups are enough: Focus Groups for Dissertation Research. Faculty Focus. <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/academic-leadership/how-many-focus-groups-are-enough-focus-groups-for-dissertation-research/>
- Iqbal, M. H., Siddiqie, S. A., & Mazid, M. A. (2021). Rethinking theories of lesson plan for effective teaching and learning. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 4(1), 100172. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2021.100172>
- Liamputtong, P. (2011). *Focus Group methodology: Principles and practices*. Sage Publications.
- Morgan, D. L. (2022). Robert Merton and the history of focus groups: standing on the shoulders of a giant?. *The American Sociologist*, 53(3), 364-373.
- Morgan, D. L. (1996). Focus groups. *Annual review of sociology*, 22(1), 129-152.
- Patel-Junankar, D. (2021). *Learner-centered pedagogy: Teaching and learning in the 21st Century*. Springer Publishing.
- Trinity College Dublin. (2019). *Focus Groups*. The University of Dublin.

Disclaimer: The views, perspectives, information, and data contained within all publications are exclusively those of the respective author(s) and contributor(s) and do not represent or reflect the positions of ERRCD Forum and/or its editor(s). ERRCD Forum and its editor(s) expressly disclaim responsibility for any damages to persons or property arising from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referenced in the content.