Student Focus Group Guidelines

The following guidelines are designed for a short (45-minute) informal Student Focus Group. The aim is to identify an area of your teaching you want to investigate and quickly and easily obtain student feedback on that aspect of your teaching.

**Important Note:** This use of student focus groups is for quality control purposes and is intended to support your personal reflection on teaching. It is not designed for formal research purposes. If you intend to publish or present the results of your reflection as research, then you should seek formal ethics approval. Further, if you are interested in organising formal, recorded, intensive Student Focus Groups for more extensive feedback you are welcome to contact the Institute for Teaching and Learning for advice and support.

**What is a Student Focus Group?**

A Student Focus Group is a moderated interview with a small number of students aimed at obtaining specific and detailed feedback on your teaching. Students Focus Groups normally involve 6-12 student participants and a moderator (not the teacher seeking feedback) in a 45-minute discussion following prepared questions.

**How do I plan a Student Focus Groups?**

There are two essential questions that you should answer before proceeding with a Student Focus Group:

- What aspect of my teaching (that is, my practice as a teacher or the design of my unit) do I want to investigate?
- Why is student feedback necessary to my evaluation of this aspect of my teaching or unit?

Once you have clear answers to these questions there are several steps to planning a Student Focus Group:

- For a 45-minute Focus Group select four questions for discussion (see ‘APPENDIX: List of Possible Questions/Prompts’). Order them by beginning with a general question, followed by two specific questions, and end with another general question.
- Arrange for a trusted peer to moderate and 6-12 student volunteers. Give them a copy of the discussion questions prior to the actual Focus Group meeting. Arrange for a venue and ensure all participants are aware of where and when the Focus Group will take place.

On the day of the Focus Group you should introduce the moderator to the students, ensure them that their responses are confidential and leave the room.

Prepared by Ben Miller for the Faculty of Arts Teaching and Learning Committee, The University of Sydney, March 2010
What does the Moderator have to do during/after a Student Focus Group?

It is essential that your moderator is professional and willing to spend time helping you run a Student Focus Group.

The moderator should:

- be professional yet easy-going during the focus group discussion.
- tell students about the purpose and process, explain how their comments will not be identified and that their anonymity and confidentiality will be respected.
- record key comments and/or opposing views and briefly double-check them with the group during the interview – finally, at the end of the interview, show the students the notes that were taken.
- prepare an observational report shortly after the interview. Again, no individual students should be named or identified in the report (i.e. the students' comments must remain confidential).

What do I do after the Student Focus Group?

Afterwards you should receive a raw observational report from the moderator. You should interpret it (preferably alongside other feedback you have received on your teaching), plan changes or strategies resulting from the feedback and report back to students. For help in interpreting feedback and reporting back to students, see the exercise ‘Interpreting the Results of a Student Focus Group’.
APPENDIX: List of Possible Questions/Prompts

The following questions and prompts are examples only. You should feel free to adapt them to better address aspects of your teaching you want to investigate.

Student Context:
1. What are your time commitments outside of university? What activities compete with university study?
2. What had you heard about the unit or teachers before the first class/lecture? What did you think the unit would be about when you chose it?

Student impressions of the course design:
3. How did you feel about the unit readings? How were readings relevant (or not) to the unit aims?
4. How did the assessment tasks help you achieve the unit’s outcomes?
   PROMPTS: What were your favourite activities/assessments in the unit?
   Why?
5. What is your sense of the balance between the range of areas covered and how thoroughly they are covered in this unit or subject?
   PROMPTS: Are there any ideas you would have liked to discuss more intensely? How much time did you feel you had to look further into key areas and ideas?
6. What, for you, have been the key ideas/areas in this unit or subject? How well do you feel you understand these?
   PROMPTS: Brainstorm some key ideas and write them on a white board – Did you expect these themes/ideas at the outset of the course?

Student impressions of learning environment:
7. What was your general impression of the ‘feel’ of classes (i.e. were students keen or lethargic, was the teacher excited/passionate or unenthusiastic)? What might have contributed to this atmosphere?
8. How did you feel about class discussions and/or activities? How were they relevant to course aims and/or assessment tasks?
9. What is your sense of any compromises or ‘short cuts’ you may have taken in this unit or subject? Why did you feel you needed to take these short cuts?
10. Did you ever feel the need to go beyond the course materials or to investigate a topic more thoroughly? What made you want to go further into a topic?

Overall student impressions:
11. How useful do you think this unit or subject will be in your future career?
   PROMPTS: What career would you like to pursue? What are the key skills in that career?
12. What advice would you give to a friend who was about to undertake this unit?

Some of these questions have been adapted from: