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Abstract

One alternative to focus group research for assessing community educational needs is participant observation research with collaborative stakeholder groups. Dialogue within collaboratives can provide an Extension professional with a robust assessment of community educational needs. In this article, I explore this concept and provide examples of published outputs resulting from my experience with collaborative group participation.

Keywords: [stakeholder involvement](#), [focus groups](#), [collaborative groups](#), [needs assessment](#), [qualitative research](#)

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Introduction

Extension professionals often conduct focus group research (Berg, 2007; Grudens-Schuck, Allen, & Larson, 2004), including for the purpose of assessing community educational needs (Allen, Grudens-Shuck, & Larson, 2004; Gamon, 1992; Malek, 2002; Vanderford, Gordon, Londo, & Munn, 2014). Extension professionals' participation in collaborative stakeholder groups, such as watershed councils, also can be a path to educational needs assessment. Or as Schwandt (2007) explains, participation in collaborative groups can be participant observation research (p. 219). Herein, I outline similarities between focus group research and participant observation of collaboratives and then provide examples of some specific needs identified through participant observation of collaboratives and the resulting responses.

Focus Group Research and Collaborative Stakeholder Group Participation, Defined and Compared

Focus group research and collaborative stakeholder group participation share similarities and have unique qualities as well. Table 1 identifies characteristics of design, participant selection, group process, and findings for these two potential needs assessment methods.

Table 1.

Characteristics of Focus Group Research and
Participant Observation of Collaborative Groups

Element	Focus group research	Collaborative stakeholder group observation
Design	"Small groups of unrelated individuals, formed by an investigator and led in a group discussion on some particular topic or topics" (Berg, 2007, p. 144; also see Schutt, 2003)	Intentionally organized place-based organizations in which local, autonomous interests work together to identify and address large-scale challenges or improve conditions (Parker, Margerum, Dedrick, & Dedrick, 2010; Wondolleck & Yaffee, 2000)
Participant selection	"Based on characteristics they share, as opposed to differences among them" (Larson, Grudens-Schuck, & Allen, 2004, p. 1)	Structured to include skilled, committed people with a common interest in natural resources management, agriculture, or another field (Flynn & Harbin 1987; Hinkey, Ellenberg, & Kessler, 2005)
Process	Focus group research involves a "carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment" (Krueger & Casey, 2015, p. 5). Focus groups operate for a discrete amount of time, usually in the range of 2 hr. Multiple focus group interviews can be held over time, but each includes different participants.	Collaborative dialogue can be a type of deliberative governance strategy (Booher & Innes, 2001; Innes & Booher, 2003). The collaborative group meeting process is planned by a facilitator, and topics are chosen on the basis of relevance to the overarching subject matter area. Collaborative group meetings tend to last about 2 hr, and largely the same group members meet regularly throughout the year.
Findings	Findings from focus group research are exploratory and useful for research, program development, or evaluation (Bloor, Frankland, & Thomas, 2001; Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1956; Merton & Kendall, 1946).	"At their heart, collaborative processes are really just complex learning processes" (Hinkey et al., 2005). Determining educational and research needs can be a natural outcome of such processes.

Either method requires time and planning. Focus group research requires more up-front administrative time (Krueger & Casey, 2015), whereas participant observation requires a greater ongoing time commitment. However, by integrating oneself into an existing collaborative group, the Extension educator can apply time and energy in different ways. The educator must make the determination about which method will be more effective, and "largely, such decisions are made on the basis of . . . advantages or disadvantages of each technique" (Berg, 2007, p. 152).

In both focus group and participant observation research, the educator becomes the key instrument in collecting data. Participant observation in collaboratives constitutes a prolonged engagement approach (Goffman, 1989; Schwandt, 2007) and is ethnographically naturalistic (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 2007). Long-term participation allows for congeniality and trust to establish, and participants feel freer to ask substantive questions of the group. Power and legitimation can affect outcomes and overall decision making (Jamal & Getz, 1999), but as is the case in either focus group or participant observation research, a commonly developed range of needs is established and prioritized. The Extension educator working with a collaborative group can immediately begin to gather rich detail identified by the group to justify relevant educational programming.

With collaboratives, openness to public participation and the prolonged nature of the experience allow new needs to emerge. Moreover, collaboratives are effective synthesizers of educational needs because they are inherently educational in nature. Hinkey, Ellenberg, and Kessler (2005) further describe the educational nature of collaborative groups:

Participants learn from each other . . . collaborative processes help identify better or more preferred solutions based on a gain of knowledge and information. Mutual learning results in all of the participants arriving at a new or different solution . . . because of their increased understanding of the issue. ("Extension, Collaborative Processes, and Change," para. 3)

Collaborative Participation Needs Assessment Examples and Resulting Responses

Collaborative stakeholder groups I participate in articulated the need for improved community knowledge about water resources. I triangulated this finding with survey data suggesting that people's perceptions of water quality are inconsistent with water managers' priorities (Robinson Research, 2015). My observations of collaborative group meetings and examination of related data resulted in my creating peer-reviewable video and print publications. Three specific examples are as follows:

- With support and encouragement from the Idaho Washington Aquifer Collaborative (IWAC), I developed a multipronged education program titled "Cleaner. Water. Faster." I wrote a grant to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Five Star and Urban Waters grant program (see http://www.nfwf.org/fivestar/Documents/2015_five-star_project-list.pdf). With the grant funding, I worked with IWAC members and University of Idaho graphic design service-learning students to create interpretive signs along a 60-mi nonmotorized corridor across the aquifer region. Each sign connects to a short peer-reviewed educational video related to protecting aquifer and rivers (Ekins, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d; Ekins, forthcoming-a, forthcoming-b, forthcoming-c, forthcoming-d) (the series is located at <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL6g6ZYcM47s9HMDtPaxT44P-hx9AhmwRS>). Additionally, high school students, with help from IWAC partners, engaged in program-related service-learning projects and water science investigations.
- I worked with the North Fork Watershed Advisory Group (WAG) to create a peer-reviewed Extension bulletin (brochure) describing the structure and importance of riparian buffer zones for clean water and soil erosion reduction (Ekins, Van de Riet, & Rennison, in press). The North Fork Coeur d'Alene River is a rural, timbered watershed that attracts recreationalists from the Spokane–Missoula corridor. Privately owned recreational and residential lots are the primary land use along the lower river. From participation in WAG meetings, I learned that landowners often cut riparian vegetation for river views. These cutover areas experience serious erosion

during high flows. Discussions with WAG members indicated a failure by the landowners to realize that the vegetative buffer holds the land in place and that less aggressive cutting would enable access while protecting land from eroding away into the river. WAG participation made possible grant funding for graphic design, printing, and mailing to all riverfront lot owners of the resulting Extension bulletin.

- With information gleaned from Lake Pend Oreille Nearshore WAG, I assisted with development of an education program for Realtors related to clean water. A peer-reviewed Extension bulletin emerged from the process (Ekins, 2016). Observations by WAG members who interact with Realtors and their clients indicated that widespread misinformation existed about a wide variety of water issues related to rural home ownership: well safety, septic system location and operation, lakeshore protection from erosion, and setbacks from streams and lakes. The bulletin provides information about private wells, septic systems, stream/lake setbacks (and other planning issues), and riparian vegetated buffers as well as an annotated directory of various water-related agencies. I secured no funding via the WAG, but WAG members and the coordinator organized almost all of the Realtor course content and much of the bulletin content.

Getting Started with Collaborative Group Participant Observation Research

Collaborative groups are open to public participation, so the process of becoming involved is generally straightforward. Begin by contacting a group's coordinator or facilitator for updated information and email list inclusion. Read meeting minutes and agendas for context, and realize that some topics will be difficult to understand without the context of continued involvement. Over time, acronyms, place locations, project names, and so forth will become familiar. As needed, ask for clarifying information about projects, programs, locations, and acronyms and about what organizations and agencies participants represent. Moreover, plan to actively seek out support for programs recommended by the group.

Conclusion

Although perhaps not useful for all types of educational needs assessments, participation in collaboratives should be viewed as an alternative method for conducting such research. Other benefits should be considered as well. For example, I value my time interacting with the other collaborative group participants on a peer level. In all, collaboratives serve as sources of information, offer great networking opportunities, and provide additional, lasting side benefits.

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