

As Basch states in his article, “focus groups are generally not appropriate for drawing inferences about larger populations, or for statistical testing and interval estimation.” Nor are they successful mechanisms for “testing hypotheses in the experimental design tradition.” (Basch, 1987). The intimacy of a focus group can draw out deeper understanding and insight from test subjects. However, the small size of the sample under investigation prohibits the ability for researchers to generalize derived conclusions as reflections of a wider, more diverse population. There is no method of control to compare subject opinions and perceptions against internal and external conditions. Often people generate stories based on a limited perspective of their experiences and these stories can influence their emotions and responses. They do not have the whole pictures, so their feedback may be mislead in assessing the root of their (positive or negative) experiences.

Another problematic issue of focus groups is that a call to elicit response may not reach valuable candidates. At UCSB, part of the LibQual assessment included a focus group. However, the people that showed up were hungry undergrads who wanted pizza. Many had never utilized library services beyond utilizing its computer lab for internet use between classes. This made it difficult to draw anything useful out of their contributions.
A focus group is a great place to start when trying to identify areas in need of improvement. It gives a logical picture of where further investigations should be targeted. Asking follow-up questions enables researchers to pinpoint and hone in on themes that are commonly identified in their field. An experienced moderator can help guide respondents to identifying their complaints, suggestions, and experiences towards these themes.

Ho and Crowley utilized SERVQUAL to identify core problems their users had with the reliability of their stacks and catalog. From their, they delved deeper into individuals’ experiences through the use of a focus group. However, rather than conduct controlled experiments regarding the areas of improvement identified by their focus group, they began to “implement changes based on suggestions from the participants” right after, expecting these actions to “help resolve some of the problems expressed by the focus group participants” (Ho and Crowley, 2003).