

Exploring qualitative research

Lisa Baxter showcases three core qualitative research techniques and how they might be applied in an arts context

1. Focus groups

A focus group involves a group of participants of similar demographics, attitudes or purchase patterns who are led through an exploration of a particular topic by a trained moderator. The aim of the encounter is to reveal insights that cannot be obtained by other research methods.

- **An exploration, not an interrogation**

From my experience, clients who commission focus groups think they will achieve better value for money by trying to cram in as many direct questions as possible. The results might be useful in certain contexts, but the insights gained would be shallow as the researcher might only skim over the surface of the issues with no time for real exploration or insight mining.

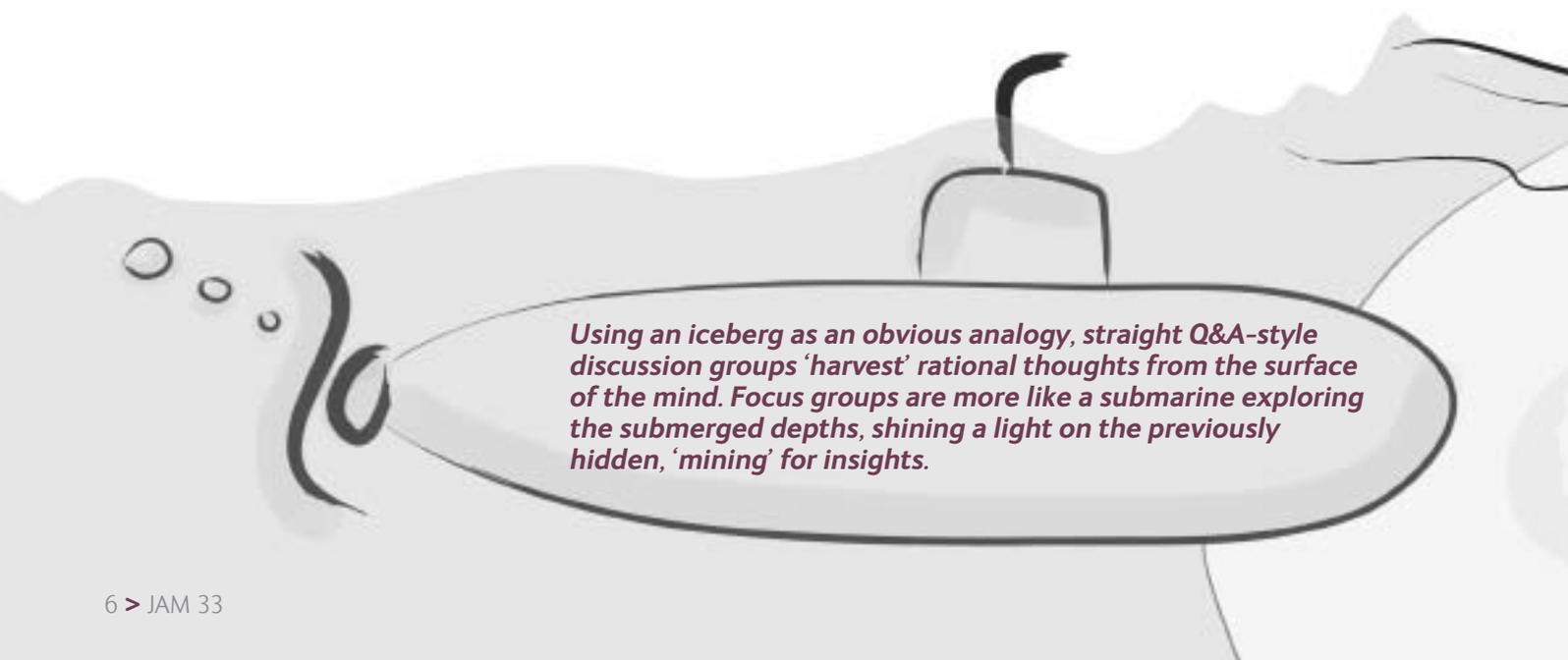
The challenge of qualitative research is how to 'go in deep' to access richer insights into your user and potential user groups.

Focus groups are very good at exploring the hidden drivers critical to decision making and exploring the nature of your audience's relationship with your organisation that they might not be cognitively aware of. Scientists generally agree that up to 95% of decision making emanates from the unconscious mind.

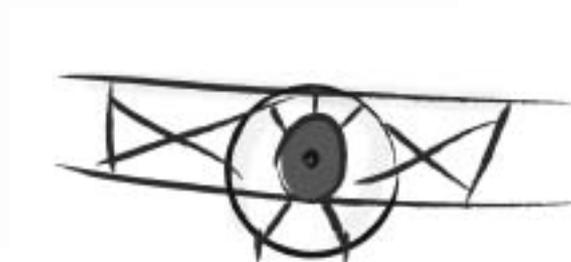
Contrary to what most of us would like to believe, decision-making may be a process handled to a large extent by unconscious mental activity. A team of scientists has unravelled how the brain actually unconsciously prepares our decisions.

Even several seconds before we consciously make a decision its outcome can be predicted from unconscious activity in the brain.¹

Therefore, if we want to try to understand people's motivations and behaviours, we need to go beyond the conscious, rational responses that are the domain of straight Q&A-style discussion groups. In order to achieve this, a qualitative researcher has a wide variety of projective and structured techniques designed to access the more intuitive, emotive, feeling part of the brain and bring to awareness insights that have not been previously accessed.



Using an iceberg as an obvious analogy, straight Q&A-style discussion groups 'harvest' rational thoughts from the surface of the mind. Focus groups are more like a submarine exploring the submerged depths, shining a light on the previously hidden, 'mining' for insights.



• **Putting you in touch with the humanity of your marketplace**

Focus groups can be used to explore people's attitudes, perceptions, needs, beliefs and values. They can help you understand your audience's personal cultural map, motivations and barriers to attendance, and provide insights into your organisation's place in their world and where you sit in relation to the competition. They can help you appreciate what role the arts and your work in particular plays in the creation of their social world and personal identities. The resulting insights provide you with a much more sophisticated user focus, putting

you in touch with the humanity of your marketplace. You can use that knowledge to build stronger, more resonant relationships with your audience, shape their arts experience and influence behaviour.

Focus groups are an important business tool that can be employed to inform many areas of your business such as branding, programme development, segmentation, customer orientation and communications. They can work hand in hand with quantitative research too, either by scoping issues prior to or fleshing out issues that arise from a survey.

• **It's not about specifics**

Of course, nothing's perfect and focus groups do have their shortcomings. For a start, they are unquantifiable and as such cannot provide statistical validation. Their value is indicative rather than definitive, exploratory rather than conclusive. They are largely ineffective at exploring the specifics of a past experience because people remember things in different ways and what they say they do might be different from the reality.



2. Observational research

Observational research involves observing a location and what people do in that location. It really comes into its own when the focus needs to be on actual rather than remembered behaviour. The value of observation is its immediacy, bringing you closer to the context of the user experience, at the time and place it was intended.

Used extensively within the museums and galleries sector, observational research can be used to plot the movement and flow of people through a gallery or museum space. It can also be used to observe behaviours, group dynamics and degrees of involvement with a particular activity, label or exhibit. Observers could sit in a fixed location to study how visitors move and behave within a given space or they could be 'attached' to an individual or group and observe the dynamics and journey of their whole visit.

• Jumping to the wrong conclusions

While observational research offers valuable information about visitor behaviour, the results offer only a partial, 'external' and highly subjective picture. Observers could draw the wrong conclusions because while they can plainly see how people behave, what they cannot appreciate is why.



*What can you observe here?
Have a think and then see below.*



Were you right?

• It's good to talk

A simple way to find out about the 'whys' behind behaviour is to combine pure observation with subject interaction. Talk to the people you are observing. Test out your assumptions and explore their behaviour and experiences from their point of view. You can do this very simply using visitor intercepts, post-visit discussions or accompanied visits. Exploring a person's experience in situ enables you to 'get into their head' rather than taking what you see at face value.

With the museums and galleries sector, observational research has been used to inform a wide variety of issues such as museum layout, exhibition design, the intellectual and physical access of exhibits and interpretation, revenue maximisation through retail outlets, and customer orientation, and, increasingly, to evaluate the degree and types of visitor engagement. Its potential applications within a performing arts venue could include positioning of display and sales information, flow management at busy times and improving the audience's 'social' experience of the venue.



3. Creative idea generation

Creative idea generation usually involves one or more facilitators working with a group of people (staff, stakeholders, users) to apply fresh thinking to an organisational issue or opportunity. The goal is applied innovation.

The six key steps to a productive creative idea generation session are:

Incubation: a pretask that gets participants in the correct frame of mind for the day so they are not coming into a creative session cold.

Define the problem: achieve clarity about what the key objective of the session is to inform relevant idea generation.

Idea generation: using the key 'rules' of traditional brainstorming,² generate as many ideas as possible.

Cluster, theme and select: organise the ideas into relevant themes or clusters in order to identify the most promising ones.

Evaluation: evaluate the best ideas against agreed criteria.

Action plan: preparation of action plans to carry the idea forward, starting with 'What can I do tomorrow to make this idea happen?'

Most idea generation sessions start to slow down after about 10–20 minutes when participants 'hit a wall'. This ideas 'impasse' is where the real creativity begins. A skilled facilitator

will have a toolkit of stimulus techniques designed to jump-start fresh ideas and get everyone's creative juices really flowing.

The value of creative idea generation is that it revitalises your thinking by giving you the space and time to approach an issue or opportunity creatively and arrive at innovative solutions. In the process, it can energise your organisation, encourage team building and provide a dynamic forum to co-create ideas with stakeholders and user groups.

• Giving insight the best start in life

Most importantly, creative idea generation can be used to bring insight to life. Every research project would benefit from culminating in a creative idea generation session designed to think laterally around the lessons learnt and develop innovative strategies to put those insights into action. You can use it to inform programme and service innovation, shape and develop exciting brand experiences, solve practical and strategic problems, develop inspiring values, missions and aspirations, strengthen your competitive advantage and devise imaginative, creative marketing campaigns. The sky's the limit.

In conclusion

What I hope I've achieved through this introduction to some aspects of qualitative research is to demonstrate how different techniques can be used to deliver different kinds of insights and results, and how valuable they are when applied as decision-making tools. What is important in all of these is the role of the participant as an active agent in the research process, helping to shape our understanding through joint exploration rather than treating them as respondents you throw questions at or subjects you gaze at from afar. ■

1. www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/04/080414145705.htm

2. www.brainstorming.co.uk/tutorials/brainstormingrules.html



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