

Suggestions for Conducting “Focus Group Classes”

Stone Soup Dispute Resolution Knowledge Project
hosted by the University of Missouri School of Law
Center for the Study of Dispute Resolution



Faculty can use “focus group classes” to promote learning about dispute resolution by inviting speakers to discuss dispute resolution issues, referring to actual cases whenever appropriate. This is a great idea for the last class in the semester, though it could be scheduled at other times.

Many faculty invite guest speakers to their classes. Using a focus group process is similar though it is generally more systematic in selecting speakers and questions. Although focus groups typically are used as a research method, “focus group classes” are for teaching.

In virtually any course, faculty can run a class period like a focus group, inviting a panel of speakers representing a variety of perspectives. For example, in a mediation course, faculty might invite a plaintiff’s lawyer, defense lawyer, insurance representative, and a mediator. Or one might invite mediators who handle different types of cases such as community, family, civil, and environmental cases. Parties in cases might be invited if appropriate.

Faculty would develop a list of questions to ask the speakers, possibly engaging students throughout the course to suggest questions for the focus group class.

Faculty should pick a small number of general questions – perhaps five and certainly no more than ten – to leave time for follow-up questions about how things work in practice. Faculty would ask speakers to respond to each other, providing students the opportunity to learn how issues look through the eyes of the different speakers. Whenever appropriate, speakers should be asked to give examples of actual cases, obviously omitting any identifying information.

Faculty need to actively moderate the discussion and allocate the time because these conversations typically have a life of their own. There may not be enough time for all the questions, so faculty may need to skip lower priority questions to permit greater depth of discussion of more important issues.

As an example of questions that might be used in a focus group class, here's the [focus group protocol developed by the ABA Section of Dispute Resolution's Task Force on Improving Mediator Quality](#). It has many more questions than there was time to ask, but it provides ideas of questions that faculty and students might ask.

Stone Soup focus group classes are easy to plan and don't take a lot of extra time. Students need not be required to write papers related to these discussions, though faculty could assign them if desired.

If law school faculty don't know of lawyers to invite, the alumni office in their schools may help identify suitable alumni who would be delighted to be asked to speak. Faculty also might check with local, state, and national bar and other professional associations to help recruit good speakers. Some speakers may appear by video.

If the normal class period is only 50 minutes, faculty might schedule a focus group session for a longer period, perhaps 90 minutes, to get full advantage of the speakers' experience. Scheduling the class in the late afternoon may avoid scheduling conflicts with other classes and make it easier for practitioners to participate. Focus group classes could be opened to the whole school.

Many faculty enjoy teaching because they learn new things when they teach. Using focus group classes would not only provide new knowledge for students, but probably for faculty and speakers too.