

**Indirect Assessment Methods –
A Close-Up Look**

by

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Surveys: Common method of gathering information from people on a wide variety of topics (personal characteristics, expectations, experience, attitudes, values, behaviors, perceptions, satisfaction), generally in the form of a questionnaire, which may be distributed in hard copy or online or – less often – administered by phone.

Advantages:

- Are well-known, broadly accepted
- Are adaptable to many different kinds of research questions
- Are adaptable to different audiences (students, alums, employers, non-completers)
- Items can vary in format, e.g., yes/no, rating scales, lists, open-ended questions
- Can reveal the “why” and “how” behind the “what”
- Results allow statistical analysis, reporting
- Self-reports are generally truthful, accurate
- Many surveys are commercially available, usually can be customized, e.g., NSSE, CCSSE, CSEP, CCSEP, CIRP, Noel-Levitz
- Purchased surveys provide norms, benchmarks, detailed reports
- Software programs are available, e.g., Survey Monkey, Zoomerang
- Software and email make surveys swift, cheap to administer
- Data are easy to store and analyze

Disadvantages:

- Construction of survey requires expertise, time, clarity about purposes
- Hiring consultants and purchasing survey services can be costly
- Surveys run danger of being too long, too broad
- Response rate may be very low
- Low response rate reduces representativeness, usefulness of results
- Structured format reduces chance of unanticipated findings
- Institutions often over-survey, leading to survey fatigue, wasted resources
- Collected data are often not used, shared
- Telephone surveys can be slow, expensive; becoming less popular

Solutions/responses:

- Use on-campus talent to construct the survey, analyze results
- Reward contributors
- Be clear about purpose and educational outcomes to be investigated
- Keep the survey as appealing, brief, easy to deal with as possible
- Create “buzz” with pre-survey communications
- Use reminders, incentives to increase response rate
- Use “captive audiences” when appropriate, e.g., class meetings, seniors lined up for commencement
- Pool and consolidate campus survey efforts, make maximum use of existing data

Interviews: One-on-one conversations designed to elicit a variety of information; may range from highly structured (much like an orally conducted survey) to open-ended and exploratory.

Advantages:

- More personal than the written survey
- More appropriate for some audiences, e.g. high-status trustees, wealthy donors, elusive non-completers
- Allow for more probing, rephrasing, to elicit targeted information
- Can reveal the “why” and “how” behind the “what”
- Are useful as follow-up to survey results

Disadvantages:

- Are labor-intensive at every stage: planning, scheduling, conducting, data recording and analysis
- Require skilled interviewers
- Do not reach as large an audience as paper or online surveys
- May elicit socially acceptable rather than accurate responses

Solutions/responses:

- Be clear about purpose
- Use selectively
- Use in combination with other methods
- Develop a basic protocol

Focus groups: structured, in-depth, group discussions of specific topics, guided by a trained moderator and generally audiotaped, videotaped, or recorded by an assistant moderator.

Advantages:

- Allow examination of otherwise elusive perceptions, feelings, attitudes, ideas
- Adaptable to wide variety of target groups, topics, issues
- Offer insights into strengths, weaknesses of educational experience
- Can reveal the “why” and “how” behind the “what”
- Are useful in tandem with a survey project:
 - at the front end, as a way to identify productive topics, questions
 - at the back end to help interpret, clarify results
- May reveal new, entirely unanticipated problems, insights
- Can be implemented relatively quickly, cheaply
- Rubric or matrix may be used to score multiple focus groups and arrive at findings
- Can do double duty as a direct method, too

Disadvantages:

- Moderators must be identified, trained
- Development of the topics, questions, and matrix requires care
- Sensitive topics may not lend themselves to focus group discussion
- Scheduling can be a challenge
- Smaller numbers of students are reached than with surveys
- Incentives for student participation may be needed
- Conduct of individual focus groups will necessarily vary
- Results may not lend themselves to statistical analysis, generalization

Solutions/responses:

- Use campus expertise, volunteers, to keep costs down
- Train new moderators by having them observe skilled moderators
- Present participation in focus group to students as privilege, opportunity
- Share interesting, surprising findings broadly, but keep identities confidential
- Use as an opportunity to show the institution listens carefully, takes student seriously

Ethnographic research: Selected students serve as participant-observers, gathering information about learning and/or student experience through conversations with fellow students, observation, and reflection on their own experiences. Participant-observers meet regularly with faculty and/or staff conducting the study to refine questions, share findings, analyze them, and plan next steps.

Advantages:

- Provides an insider perspective otherwise unavailable
- Allows longer-term inquiry, e.g., a semester as opposed to one-time interview
- Allows in-depth study, exploration of “why” and “what to do” as well as “what”
- Provides access to elusive values, attitudes
- Can include non-verbal information such as body language, demeanor
- Has potential to produce unanticipated, surprising findings
- Has high likelihood of producing useful, actionable information
- Is adaptable, e.g., to student life as well as academic issues

Disadvantages:

- Requires careful definition of the topic of study
- Is time-consuming
- Requires training, continuing attention, regular meetings
- Quality, commitment of participant-observers may vary
- Attrition of participant-observers may reduce usefulness of results
- Few models are available

Solutions/responses:

- Choose participant-observers carefully
- Provide training, incentives, support
- Focus the inquiry but allow for evolution of project, adaptation to unexpected findings
- Provide incentives to participant-observers and /faculty/staff coordinating project
- Create a risk-free environment
- Avoid identification of individuals when reporting findings

Director or indirect? Some methods can work both ways . . .

Classroom research: Classroom research is included here as a direct method but it can function as either a direct or an indirect method. Of the dozens of classroom assessment techniques (or CATs) developed by Cross and Angelo, some demonstrate what students know and can do, while others elicit reflection, perceptions, and other forms of indirect evidence.

Course management programs: Course management programs make it possible for faculty to capture discussions and other evidence that would be ephemeral in the classroom; hence they are classified here as a direct method. Such programs often include a survey or questionnaire template, however, that makes it easy to construct and administer surveys online. See discussion of surveys in handout on "Indirect Methods."

Focus groups: Focus groups are generally regarded as an indirect method of assessment because students are encouraged to talk about their personal experiences and perceptions. However, they can also function as a direct method, if the topic of discussion is an issue in the major and students are guided by the protocol to demonstrate their command of disciplinary concepts, theories and methods. In this case, students do not receive a grade for their role in the discussion, but the recording is analyzed by faculty to draw more general conclusions about the strengths and weaknesses of the academic program.

Portfolios: Portfolios can function as both a direct and an indirect assessment method. They are direct in the sense that student work is displayed and can be rated, providing direct evidence of knowledge and skills. The reflective essays, in which students look back on various pieces of their work, describe what each represented in terms of challenges or achievements, and evaluate their personal progress as learners, are indirect evidence of a high order.

Student self-assessment: Self-assessment is classified here as a direct method because the performance of self-assessment demonstrates directly how skilled students are at self-assessment. However, the process may be structured to elicit student reflection on how learning occurred, what helped or didn't, etc. In other words, self-assessment can also function as an indirect method.