

EVALUATING THE FREEDOM CENTRE FORUM



Overview

The Freedom Centre Forum (FCF) is an online discussion forum for gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer (GLBTIQ) youth. The FCF is a safe online space for young people to get information, peer support, and talk to people who have similar experiences with sexuality and gender. It is a place for young people to ask questions, vent and share opinions about sexuality, gender, self esteem and other things that are important to them. The FCF enables young people to get involved in the Freedom Centre community. Rules for participating in the FCF are published on the Freedom Centre website and trained volunteers moderate the space to ensure it remains safe for all participants.



Target Group

The Freedom Centre Forum is accessible by GLBTIQ youth worldwide but is primarily targeted at those young people living in Western Australia.



Evaluation

The Freedom Centre coordinator and another peer research assistant identified six main evaluation questions:

- 1) Why do young people access the FCF?
- 2) What features of the FCF do young people value the most?
- 3) What are the impacts on young people of participating in the FCF?
- 4) Who uses the FCF?
- 5) How do young people use the FCF? e.g. for themselves? for a friend? read only? read and post?
- 6) How safe is the FCF space?

The My-Peer project team worked with the two peer research assistants to design and develop five evaluation strategies which could be used to answer the evaluation questions. Using more than one evaluation strategy helps to increase the reliability of the data collected and allows different questions to be answered. The table below shows the evaluation strategies that were developed in response to the evaluation questions.

	Discussion threads	Content analysis	Online survey	Most Significant Change Technique	Web statistics
Evaluation questions					
Why do young people access the FCF?	Y	Y	Y		Y
What features of the FCF do young people value the most?	Y	Y	Y		

	Discussion threads	Content analysis	Online survey	Most Significant Change Technique	Web statistics
Evaluation questions					
What are the impacts on young people of participating in the FCF?	Y	Y		Y	Y
Who uses the FCF?			Y		Y
How do young people use the FCF?	Y		Y		Y
How safe is the FCF space?	Y	Y	Y		

Each evaluation strategy is described in detail below.

1. Discussion threads

Questions which could be used to start new evaluation discussion threads and collect direct feedback from young people visiting the FCF were identified by the peer research assistants:

- *What is the most significant change for you since first accessing the forum?*
- *Why did you first access the forum?*
- *Why do you continue to access the forum?*
- *What do you like about the FCF? What would you change about the FCF?*
- *Do you generally access the forum for yourself or for someone else?*
- *How do you use the forum? e.g. read only, read and write*
- *Has anything you have read on the forum caused you concern? Please explain*
- *Describe a defining moment in your life during the past 3 months*
- *Tell us one or more good things that have happened to you in the last 3 months*

2. Content analysis

Content analysis provides a structured process for reviewing the posts made by visitors and moderators on the FCF in order to collect process and impact evaluation data. The *Evaluation Framework for Peer-Based Youth Programs* was used as a starting point. Initially, 17 evaluation sub-forums were set up on the FCF corresponding to the various components of the evaluation framework. This structure proved too complex in practice and following some discussion, the sub-forums were replaced by five evaluation discussion threads which focused on monitoring the characteristics of the target group, program and peer group factors, monitoring the safe space and assessing the extent to which the FCF was meeting its core objectives. The 5 evaluation discussion threads were:

1. **FC Visitors Presenting Issues**
2. **FC Peer Group Factors**
3. **Impacts on Social Connectedness & Community Engagement**
4. **Impacts on Help Seeking**
5. **Impacts on Mental and Physical Wellbeing**

In addition, an ‘**Evaluation Questions and Feedback**’ discussion thread was set up within the moderators’ forum to capture feedback and suggestions from moderators during the trial.

The FCF content analysis process involved moderators reviewing each post as normal, responding to the post if necessary, and then copying and pasting any parts of the post containing relevant data to one or more of the five evaluation threads. In addition the moderator was required to write a couple of sentences in the evaluation thread outlining the context of the content that was pasted.

The information collected in the evaluation discussion threads provided a means of sorting and classifying data which could then be easily reviewed and retrieved for reporting purposes. The number of unique user profiles associated with each evaluation discussion thread could also be determined through web statistics. When counting frequencies in this way, posts were reviewed carefully to ensure positive and negative perspectives remained separate, for example 10 posts in the help seeking thread may include 7 posts that reported increased help-seeking and 3 posts that reported difficulties in seeking help

An interactive **FCF Evaluation Training Package** and **FCF Moderators' Guide** was produced for forum moderators.

3. Online survey

A link to an online survey (e.g. through www.surveymonkey.com) will be emailed to all forum visitors twice a year in advance of the reporting cycles to collect anonymous feedback on the FCF including:

- *Why do you access the forum – e.g. friendship, to ask questions*
- *What have you found useful – e.g. information, peer support*
- *How have you used forum – e.g. read only, read and post, for a friend, for self*
- *What has been the most significant change for you since coming to FC?*
- *Has your behaviour changed e.g. improved help seeking etc*
- *Demographics – e.g. age group, gender, postcode*

4. Most Significant Change Technique

The Most Significant Change (MSC) Technique collects stories of change from program staff and/or participants. Stories are then reviewed by a core group of project stakeholders to identify the most significant changes and impacts. The decision-making process to select the most significant stories can also be very beneficial. The ensuing discussions highlight each individual's values in relation to the program and any inconsistencies can be discussed and addressed.

At FC, the MSC technique will be implemented as follows:

1. Ongoing – Content analysis of FCF & FC Drop-in sessions debrief
2. December – FC Team meet & review compiled Evaluation Data and discuss & select MSC quotes and impacts
3. May - MSC discussion thread and online survey
4. June – FC Team meet & review compiled MSC survey data & Evaluation data and discuss & select MSC quotes and impacts. This discussion will focus on FC objectives & values in order to determine the most significant changes and impacts.
5. Include MSC in FC Department of Mental Health & Annual Reports

The MSC technique will be used to ask visitors:

- *What's the most significant change that's happened for you as a result of coming to FC/FCF?*
- *Why is this significant to you?*

The MSC technique will be used to ask volunteers:

- *What's the most significant change that's happened for you as a result of coming to FC/FCF?*
- *What's the most significant change that's happened for the visitors as a result of them coming to FC/FCF? (based on stories collected & compiled)*
- *Why are these significant to you?*

5. Web statistics

Some quantitative data can be collected through web statistics generated automatically to assess reach (i.e. who is using the FCF, when and for how long) and impact. This data can be reviewed periodically to determine emerging trends of usage and to ensure adequate support is available at peak times. Statistics may include:

- *Types of user – age group, location, gender*
- *Number of unique users*
- *Frequency of usage – daily, weekly, monthly etc*
- *Time of access – after hours, school hours*
- *Peaks of usage e.g. school holidays, after hours*
- *Duration of usage before lapsing – weeks, months, years*



Outcomes

A more extensive trial of evaluation strategies is planned during 2010. Only two of the evaluation strategies (*Evaluation discussion threads* and *Content analysis*) have been trialed so far during October-November 2009:

Evaluation discussion threads

New discussion threads created by moderators with an ‘evaluation focus’ proved to be an effective way of collecting some quick feedback from forum users and a way of keeping the forum discussions fresh, particularly when existing discussion threads had come to an end or were taking an undesirable path, e.g. focused on negatives.

Content analysis

The content analysis process provided a way of sorting and storing data that could be more easily accessed for reporting purposes, e.g. inserting quotes into reports. Reviewing forum content for evaluation purposes does however add an extra step to the forum moderators’ task and the importance of collecting evaluation data needs to be carefully explained to moderators during training.

The following recommendations came out of the action research experience:

- Take time to understand the evaluation framework and what components are particularly relevant to focus on for your specific program context
- Limit the number of sub-forums that are set up to ‘file’ evidence
- When setting up the content analysis framework, work with a partner. The process can take some time to get used to and it is useful to check the structure is meaningful to more than one person.
- Encourage moderators to review others’ posts in the evaluator sub-forums to check they agree with the classification of the evidence and to avoid double-posting in the evaluation sub-forums. The forum coordinator should also periodically check all evaluation threads for consistency – are posts being filed correctly?
- Some posts contained several themes – the broader clusters of the 5 evaluation threads made it easier to file evaluation data correctly
- A quick reference booklet or user manual summarising the content analysis process may help.
- The process of reviewing posts for the purpose of evaluation takes time to understand and master. If this does not become a habit, it may not be done efficiently. While reporting may only be done twice a year, it is recommended that all posts are reviewed for evaluation data.

This may be labour intensive during times of peak activity but effort required should be less at other times, another point which can be emphasized in training.

- Training needs to be hands-on and interactive with time devoted to moderators actually trying out the process for themselves after a demonstration.

Despite the additional effort involved, there were many perceived benefits overall:

- Peer research assistants felt very motivated by evaluation activities.
- The process of reviewing content boosts morale to see evidence that the FCF is realising its objectives. This is a bonus even if the data does not get used in the short term but is mainly used during the reporting periods.
- Reinforces for staff/volunteers why the FCF is so important and why their role is so valuable.
- The content analysis process provides some direction for other program and evaluation activities – underlines what FC is trying to achieve, brings FC objectives front of mind.
- Moderators can get a bigger picture of the FCF service.
- Moderators learn more background information about visitors and develop a deepened awareness of how they can help them which makes them more effective in their role.
- Has an influence on conscious behaviour – moderators become more aware of the repercussions of their own posts and attitudes on visitors.
- Reviewing the evaluation threads provides a way of bringing new moderators up to speed with what FC is trying to achieve.