Methods #3: Urging creativity

"Having ideas is very cool"

There are plenty of quotes about the strength, danger and power of ideas - here we look at ways of how to get there. Developing ideas together, how to make space for innovation and creative input. Looking at techniques of how to break the daily thinking patterns and find unexpected combinations of the known. Choosing ideas for implementation, in open group processes and keeping available resources in mind.

Visuals by:
gerbengrotenhuis.com

3.1 Generating ideas

For solid groups it might be possible to sit around a table and write down ideas while having an interesting conversation, but for others, a change of the setting, new rules or techniques can help trigger the creative process. Looking at how to involve the whole group, using the full potential of all members, we aspire to create an active and jolly atmosphere while brainstorming, encouraging to share also "stupid", "impossible" and "irrelevant" ideas.

Empty your brain

Time:

>30 min
Target group:

Any
Group size:

Any
Material:

Paper and pens.

If you empty your brain - there will be more space for new ideas. So lets get everything out of your head onto paper and organize it better!

This method is helpful when you need to start up an idea session, giving your brain a fresh new sheet to start from. It can also be used as a way to structure your thoughts and the tasks gathered in your mind, where the output can be a to-do list or a time-line with tasks mapped to it.

The Empty Brain method is about getting everything out of your head and down on paper so that you can stop thinking about it. It can be done in a group as well as individually. If driven by a facilitator, the role is to be responsible for setting up the method for how to empty the brain. E.g. choose between mind mapping/time-lining/others.

Simply write down everything you have on your mind on paper, do not discriminate between important and less important while writing, you can do that later if you really want to. Let everything from "*remember to buy bread*" to "*contact the band playing tomorrow at the event i am organizing*" be part. After you have emptied your brain, let the notes rest, while you carry on with getting

ideas with a fresh mind. If you want, you can always get back to the notes after you have your new ideas in place, and structure it to a task list, but that is more like a side effect of the exercise.

Visuals by:
Adam Ward (CC BY-SA 2.0)

> **Tip:**
> This method comes from the "Project of how"
> (projectofhow.com). Its worth a visit!

Mind mapping

Time:

30 mins
Target group:

Any
Group size:

Any
Material:

Flipchart papers, Colour pens

This is a visual and effective method both for generating ideas and starting to structure them. It can be used as starting point to create a collective definition or to explore more concrete topics. Mind maps have a common structure composed by a central image of the main idea or concept, and branches with related ideas.

Select *one* idea/topic/issue you want to explore with the group and write it in the middle of a flip chart paper. Ask the participants to write ideas associated to this topic, creating different branches coming from it. When you have several ideas you can start to make connections between your branches or create new branches within the ones created. After some time, when your map have had time to grow, select some of the connections and start a discussion about them. The mind map can be a tool that you can have present during all your sessions/training and you can come back to at any point to refresh your thoughts about the topic. Such a flip chart paper can help you to build understanding among each other and during a discussion or heavy argument can be an efficient tool for better communication.

Mind maps are known for having one idea in the center of attention and this center is where all the branches and thoughts are starting from. We can call this an idea-tree. If you don't have one specific idea in mind but you are thinking about the relation between more ideas, or just want to chart out lots of ideas, we recommend you to draw idea-graphs instead of using mind maps.

> **Tip:**
> If the participants have problems finding ideas and make associations, you can ask them questions related with your topic. Example: your topic is "reclaiming the public space" and you can ask them to write down some public spaces they know like the park, the library. This provides a startingpoint for further ideas. Mindmapping is a very well known method and you can find a lot of information and examples about it on the internet,. For example: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mind_map. There is an opensource program to create your own digital mind maps (idea trees) called FreeMind: http://freemind.souceforge.net For mapping idea-graphs we can recommend you to use the yEd which is free to use by individuals and available on the web at http://www.yworks.com.

Negative brainstorming

Time:

30 mins
Target group:

Any
Group size:

10-20
Material:

Pen and paper.

A method that use brainstorming to generate bad solutions to the problem, and then see how those could be transformed into good solutions.

This can be a fun way to use brainstorming in a silly manner, to work solving problems from a different angle. This method encourages you to explore new solutions through negative thinking. This gives you new angles on plausible

solutions, from using the things you thought where not useful.

Provide the group with pen and paper, and the topic they brainstorm around. In negative brainstorming the group tries to find the worst solutions, and then transforming these into useful solutions. One example could be; A group is tasked with finding solutions to the question 'How could you make children and grand parents understand each other more?'

These are examples of bad solution:

- To build a wall between old and young people.
- To put them in two different buildings so they never meet.
- Make a machine that really distracts the youngsters so they don't want to spend time with the elders.

A transformed bad solution would be:
- Create a retirement home with a kindergarten in the middle. The elders could then come by and help when they have time.

> **Tip:**
> This method comes from the "Project of how" (http://projectofhow.com/) Its worth a visit!

Silent brainstorm

Time:

30 mins
Target group:

Any
Group size:

Any
Material:

Large paper sheets, markers in different colors, pens.

This method is especially good with a group of people who tend to speak very much, or where not everyone get to speak equally much. It can also be good to use if during the day there has been a lot of discussion and talks.

Divide in groups of maximum 4 people. Avoid talking during the brainstorm. Each group have a topic for their brainstorm, as for example "Urban games". For 15 minutes the group brainstorm silently on their piece of paper, comment by writing and connect their ideas. After 15 minutes of silent brainstorming, the group can speak and conclude and elaborate the outcome.

Tip:
If you also want to select ideas, you can add the step of circling and marking the most appealing ideas after the discussion

Six thinking hats

Time:

30 mins
Target group:

Any
Group size:

Any
Material:

Six hats, paper hats or pieces of paper of 6 colors: white, yellow, red, green, blue and black.

The six thinking hats exercise by Edward the Bono is a well known method of parallell thinking, where you approach a topic from different perspectives. With this method new questions, problems and ideas arise.

Each group thinks about a topic they want to reflect about. A topic could be for example an action they are planning. The facilitator introduce the "6 thinking hats" and explain what each color means.

The blue hat means process: Thinking about thinking and manage the thinking process. What thinking is needed?

The white hat means facts: Information and data known or needed. Neutral and objective. What do I know? What do I need to find out?

The red hat means feelings: Intuition, gut instinct. My feelings right know, No reasons are given.

The green hat means creativity: Ideas, Alternatives, Possibilities. Express new concepts and perceptions. Solutions to Black problems

The yellow hat means benefits: Optimism and brightness. Exploring the positives and probe for value and benefit. Logical reason are given

The black hat means cautions: Difficulties, Weaknesses,dangers. Logical reasons are given, Spotting the risks.

People from each group choose one hat or color paper and think about the topic using this perspective. The rest of the group can make questions to go deeper in this perspective. The ones who are wearing the color of the hat have to answer their questions using the perspective that the color refers. For example if he is wearing red it has to answer all the questions in an emotional way, thinking about feelings.

The people in the groups are changing and choosing different hats or color papers to get different perspectives and questions about the topic.

There is also the possibility that 2 people from the group take different hats and discuss together about the topic.

> **Tip:**
> Depending on the group participants could have the tendency of using one type of hat. Try to encourage groups to use all the colors to get a broaden perspective of the topic they are working with. This method has been created by Edward the Bono in his book "6 thinking hats". You can find a lot of information about this method in internet

Techniques of lateral thinking

Time:

>30 min
Target group:

Any
Group size:

3-10
Material:

Paper and pens to write down ideas

These techniques of lateral thinking help to open your mind to new ideas. Lateral thinking is solving problems through an indirect and creative approach, using reasoning that is not immediately obvious and involving ideas that may not be obtainable by using only traditional step-by-step logic. The term was coined in 1967 by Edward de Bono.

The random entry point

This method helps you to find new ideas by randomizing your entry point of thinking.

The thinker, or a group of thinkers, choose an object randomly, or a noun from a dictionary. Associate the object or the noun with the area you are thinking about. For example*, you are thinking about how to improve a website. An object chosen at random from the surrounding environment might be a fax machine. Random thoughts on fax machines? A fax machine transmits images over the phone to paper. Fax machines are becoming rare. People send faxes directly to phone numbers. Perhaps this could suggest a new way to embed the web-site's content in emails and other sites.*

Tips: While brainstorming on different nouns, try not to switch immediately to choosing best ideas. When you feel happy/tired enough with rushing over with your bright ideas - find some minutes to run through your creations one by one together to check which of them are liked the best and can be applied.

Provocation

Fit yourselves in small groups and choose one of the Provocation Technics for you to start on: wishful thinking, exaggeration, reversal, escape or distortion. For example, if you aim to engage more people for your student group, - reversal of reasons - why people would not join, can actually help to come up with points you would forget to think about before coming up with decision. Challenging the assumption that people should join at all - escaping it - can help to reveal new possibilities to do your things.

After a group of thinkers created a list of all these crazy provocation, most outlandish ones can be chosen to move forward to new ideas.

Challenge

Asking "Why?" in a non-threatening way is the main idea of this method.

This approach is about finding out why something exists, why it is done the way it is. The result is a very clear understanding of "Why?" which naturally leads to fresh new ideas. The goal is to be able to challenge anything at all, not just items which are problems. For example, *one could challenge the handles on coffee cups. The reason for the handle seems to be that the cup is often too hot to hold directly. Perhaps coffee cups could be made with insulated finger grips, or there could be separate coffee cup holders similar to beer holders.*

Disproving

Place yourselves in smaller groups (3-5 people) and your minds in state of thinking that the majority is always wrong. Your task is to take anything that is obvious, generally accepted as "goes without saying" and question it. Take an opposite view, and try to convincingly disprove it. When the group feels finished with the exercise make a round to sum up conclusions.

Yes-No-Maybe

Time:

1 hour
Target group:

Any
Group size:

Any
Material:

Paper and pens for notes, poster with names of the rounds.

The aim of this exercise is to open the creative thinking, its good warming up activitiy for the groups before the idea generating and action planning.

The basic idea of the exercise is to propose ideas in the group and get different types of answers (negative, sceptical, encoraging and positive). The results of this exercise also might be already some ideas for actions.

Explaining the exercise

Explain the group the essence of the exercise, give an overview of the sequence of the activities. Explain the rules of each round just before the round, so people can focus on the current round. Try not provide too much of practical examples, because that might limit the imagination.

Dividing in groups

Use a suitable method to divide in groups of 3-5 people. For example, couting 1-2-3-4 in the round, or making a lottery, or asking to close your eyes and choose person, with whom you had the first eye contact after opening eyes (and so on).

"No-" round

The facilitator explains the group rules of the round:

one person offers and idea for an activity (depending from the experience level of the group, it can be directly related to creative activism, related to another topic that is common in the group, or just general free time activity). The next person clockwise says NO - just denies the idea (with or without an argument). This step is to be repeated until everyone in the small group has proposed at least one idea.

The facilitator closes the round, when all the subgroups are done.

"No-but" round

The facilitator explains the group rules of the round:

one person offers and idea for an activity. The next person clockwise denies the idea, but gives an alternative (NO, BUT) This step is to be repeated until everyone in the small group has proposed at least one idea.

The facilitator closes the round, when all the subgroups are done.

"Yes-but" round

The facilitator explains the group rules of the round:

one person offers and idea for an activity. The next person clockwise approves the idea generally, but finds an exchuse (YES, BUT) This step is to be repeated until everyone in the small group has proposed at least one idea.

The facilitator closes the round, when all the subgroups are done.

"Yes-and" round

The facilitator explains the group rules of the round:

one person offers and idea for an activity. The next person clockwise approves the idea and suggests an additional activiy, or way how to develop the idea (YES, AND). Then the next person clockwise suggests something related to the previous suggestion (YES, AND), the idea can be developed for one or two rounds, or until the group members run out of suggestions. This step is to be repeated until everyone in the small group has started at least one idea.

The facilitator closes the round, when all the subgroups are done.

Optional: Extracting the ideas

The facilitators invites subgroups to note down the ideas from the last round that could be actual ideas for an action. The groups summarise the ideas and can work on some development, if there is time. Then representatives from groups are asked to represent the few ideas (2 min).

Reflection round

The facilitators ask the participants to share their experience through this exercise - which moments where easy, which where difficult and why, what do they learned through this exercise.

Depending from the size or group, the reflection can be for all the group members, voluntary in big group, or in the small groups.

> **Tip:**
> This exercise is suitable for very different stages of action planning - it is usefull, when you already know the technique (for example, street theatre), or generally warming up the group and gathering ideas about the creative activism.

3.2 Structuring ideas

You might have heard the phrase "Kill your darlings" or "Only the ideas which are put into practice are good ideas". When there is no obvious answer, on how to proceed with the results of a creative brainstorm, some of these methods can be helpful to guide the process further. How to prioritize and select the most popular, random, or realistic ideas and proceed to the phase of realizations.

The impossible is possible

Time:

2 hours
Target group:

Any
Group size:

10-20
Material:

Brainstorm results presented to be visible for the whole group, small stickers or colorful markers (3 contrasting colors like red and green), paper and pens for individual notes.

This is a method that can be used after brainstorming to select ideas for creative acts that will be developed further.

Each of the participants gets stickers or markers in three different colors. They have 6 votes in total, 2 in each category - in the first round 2 colors will be used for the following categories - *most innovative idea, the best idea* (each facilitator can choose the categories that suit the group).

The participants can give their votes to the ideas anonymously, one by one, or all together - depending from the size of the group. The ffacilitators summarizes the results of the voting and invites group to reflect on the result (depending from the size of the group - all together, or in smaller groups).

Analyzing the ideas

First analyze the ideas that did not get any votes

Instead of asking "*Why is this a bad idea?*" ask "*How can we make this idea interesting?*"

The facilitator takes care that during the critical selection the positive side of the arguments are always seen. For example, a participant says "*We will never get local people to participate in this action*" - facilitator can ask "*Ok, so how can we make this idea more interesting to the local audience?*" or another example - a participant says "*this will only attract men*" - a facilitator can ask "*how can we encourage gender balance in the activities?*"

After summarizing the ideas after the critical selection, the facilitator invites people to use their last 2 dots and vote on the ideas again.

Group reflection round

The facilitator asks the group to reflect on surprise moments during the exercise as well as what things did not changed the perspective of the participants.

> **Tip:**
> It is a great method to turn the skeptical and critical energy in the group into constructive feedback. However, it would not fit together with the negative thinking brainstorm, because then the method will not be a surprise for the group.