
~ TRAINING SOLUTIONS ~

An e-newsletter supporting effective adult learning practices

October 2005

MONTANA EARLY CHILDHOOD PROJECT

Issue #8

FACILITATING MEANINGFUL BRAINSTORMING ACTIVITIES

Written by Susan Harper-Whalen and Sandra L. Morris

There is an ideal solution to your problem and brainstorming is the key to finding it. ~ Lyndsay Swinton

INTRODUCTION

Brainstorming is a useful training strategy for generating ideas around a specific topic or challenge. The primary goal of brainstorming is to produce a free and creative flow of ideas in a way that helps participants move beyond the scope of their experiences to discover unique outcomes and creative solutions. Brainstorming is a key component of a problem-solving process, which includes three basic steps: a) clarifying participants' understanding of a problem, b) generating possible solutions through brainstorming, and c) selecting one or more solutions to best resolve the problem or issue at hand. The ability to engage in problem-solving and generate creative ideas/solutions is a critical skill for effective early childhood teachers. A trainer's use of brainstorming activities enhances and deepens this skill at the same time that it enlivens the training session.

Brainstorming is more productive when participants have a common experience and a solid theoretical framework. This mutual foundation establishes a springboard for ideas, grounds contributions in recommended practice, and sets the stage for producing useful outcomes. To ensure this framework exists, the facilitator needs to lay an accurate foundation of knowledge and relevant experiences related to the topic or issue prior to a typical brainstorming activity.

Once this knowledge/experience foundation is established, you can introduce the key issue, ask participants to offer ideas or solutions quickly in an unstructured fashion, and facilitate public recording of the ideas for followup analysis. For example, after a presentation on strategies for modifying toys and play materials to meet

individual strengths and needs, you might say, "let's create a list of all the ways an art center could be adapted to better meet the needs of a child with limited ability to grasp objects; just call out your ideas as they come to mind."

The following guidelines describe how to use brainstorming as a meaningful training strategy. The guidelines are followed by a section describing basic rules for introducing brainstorming to participants.

GUIDELINES FOR FACILITATING A BRAINSTORMING ACTIVITY

~ **Allow participant "think time" before brainstorming begins.** Preparatory time is likely to increase the percentage of participants who offer ideas during brainstorming. As you introduce the agenda for the training session, explain that there will be a brainstorming activity after your mini-presentation and briefly describe the issue to be addressed. This gives participants a framework for listening to your presentation and prepares their minds for active involvement in brainstorming. When you finish the presentation, introduce the brainstorming topic in more detail, briefly explain the basic rules for brainstorming, and set aside a 2-3 minute time period for participants to think individually and make notes of ideas if they choose.

~ **Encourage a free flow of ideas during the brainstorming activity.** The goal of brainstorming is to generate many different ideas. The ideas can be sorted and processed later. In brainstorming, the total sum of ideas is proportional to the number of quality ideas. In

other words, the more ideas the group is able to generate, the more likely it will be that effective ideas or solutions emerge. Discussing or evaluating the utility of ideas as they are presented is tempting for both participants and facilitator, but doing this inhibits the idea-generating process. It is the facilitator's job to resist this temptation and to light-heartedly encourage participants both before and during the brainstorming activity to resist this temptation as well. Posting a chart of the basic rules of brainstorming and referring participants to them will help. There is almost always someone who is tempted to respond with a "yeah, but" reason the idea would not work in their program. Do your best to keep that from happening, but do it with kindness and fun.

The aim of brainstorming is to churn out as many ideas as you have time for BEFORE you do any reality check on their merits.
~ Lyndsay Swinton

~ Allow ample time to facilitate the creative process.

Typically, a brainstorming session will move through three phases. First, fairly obvious and simple ideas are generated. Then, the group typically moves into an almost "silly" stage where ideas seem impractical and laughter dominates the room. Don't give up! From these silly ideas, truly creative and original ideas begin to emerge, if you are encouraging and allow enough time. Ideas generated in the third phase look at issues in fresh ways and combine the best ideas from the first two phases to create new, innovative solutions to the challenge or issue presented.

Well-run brainstorming sessions draw out ideas too divergent to be suggested through other techniques.

~ Seamon & Fellenz

~ Encourage participants to build upon each others' ideas.

Brainstorming is a group process so build group rather than individual ownership of ideas into the activity. Rather than refer to an idea as Bill's idea, say "one of the ideas generated by the group was . . . , can anyone expand on that?" These types of comments help participants see themselves as a team working together to build upon the ideas of other team members and develop even better solutions.

~ Respect the groups' brainstorming by using the results.

Have a clear purpose for the brainstorming activity by describing how the results of the brainstorming activity will support participants in their ongoing

work as early childhood professionals. Once the purpose is clear, help participants understand the reason for the brainstorming activity and establish a process so they will have a record of their work. When brainstorming is a large group activity, you can be the recorder or you can ask a participant to record the group's ideas. Many trainers find that brainstorming records are more accurate and facilitation is easier when someone else records the ideas being generated. If participants are divided into small groups for the activity, make sure each group chooses a recorder to document their ideas.

Whether in small or large groups, it is helpful to record ideas on flip charts or overheads that everyone can see, so participants can refer to the ideas during the brainstorming process. These lists can be posted around the training room for reference during subsequent activities. Better yet, transcribe the lists and send a copy to participants as a follow-up to the training session. When these lists are to be tossed into the trash after the session, at least wait until participants leave the room. Participants state that they feel somewhat emotionally attached to this investment of their time and energy, and tossing them in the garbage in front of them seems disrespectful.

~ Recognize the influence of trainer comments on the brainstorming process.

As you facilitate the brainstorming activity, keep your comments short and neutral. The results of brainstorming are compromised when you dismiss a suggestion or scrutinize an idea by making comments such as "that seems like an expensive solution; where would you get the funding?" Participants are likely to withdraw their interest in the activity and hold back their ideas when contributing no longer feels safe.

While it may seem obvious that you should not criticize ideas as they are expressed, positive comments can have a negative impact as well. When you overpraise with comments such as "that's the best idea I've ever heard," you discourage the generation of more ideas because the "best one" is already taken. Neutral comments are the primary tool for keeping ideas flowing. Neutral comments are: "There's another idea." "Thank you. What else?" "I'm learning a lot from your suggestions."

Not everyone enjoys brainstorming and group problem-solving. Shyness [and] fear of looking stupid or silly may keep people quiet. Brush up on your facilitation skills and avoid the risk of great ideas being unspoken or unheard.

~ Lyndsay Swinton

RULES FOR BRAINSTORMING

It is important that you not only provide the context for brainstorming and a safe environment for the activity, but that you help participants understand and follow the basic rules for effective brainstorming. Most authors agree that there are three basic rules to follow.

~ **Everyone plays!** Share any idea that seems even remotely appropriate to the challenge or issue and feel free to build upon one another's ideas.

~ **Keep the ideas coming!** Accept ideas without judgment or discussion.

~ **It's all good!** No negative comments or criticism, even in humor, of any person or idea is allowed.

Brainstorming outcomes are much more successful when trainers do not assume that participants already know the rules and how to follow them. It is best then to restate these rules at the outset of any brainstorming activity, and post the rules in full view or have them at each groups' table on a table tent. You can refer to the written record and select the most useful ideas later.

CONCLUSION

Meaningful brainstorming activities build upon a foundation of knowledge and experience that allows participants to generate creative solutions—grounded in appropriate practice—to everyday problems and issues. Brainstorming is a key component of creative problem-solving and an invaluable skill for early childhood educators. The result of effective brainstorming activities is likely to be a list of useful ideas that is more comprehensive than just one or even two people could generate. As the commonly used phrase exclaims, "together we're better!" ~

RESOURCES*

* *Effective Strategies for Teaching Adults* (1989) by D.F. Seaman and R.A. Fellenz. Merrill: Columbus, OH.

* *Management for the Rest of Us*, Lyndsay Swinton, Owner, www.mftrou.com

* *Workshops That Work: 100 Ideas to Make your Training Events More Effective* (1993) by T. Bourner, V. Martin, and P. Race. McGraw-Hill: Berkshire, England.

TRAINING SOLUTIONS was established by the Early Childhood Project at Montana State University with monies from the federal Child Care and Development Fund administered through the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services Early Childhood Services Bureau. It is designed to support positive and effective training strategies for use in early childhood professional development.

TRAINING SOLUTIONS is published six times a year. Individuals on the Montana Early Childhood Trainer Directory receive the e-newsletter as a benefit through the ECP Trainer Listserv. If you are not currently subscribed to the listserv, or are unsure if you are or not, please check your status by e-mailing ecp@montana.edu. **TRAINING SOLUTIONS** is also available at www.montana.edu/ecp. Contents may be reproduced without permission; please include reference.

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Sandra Morris, Editor - Training Solutions

Child Care plus+, The University of Montana Rural Institute, 634 Eddy Avenue, Missoula, MT 59812-6696

1-800-235-4122 or (406) 243-2891

sandra.morris@ruralinstitute.umt.edu

EDITORIAL TEAM: Sandra Morris; Susan Harper-Whalen; Sara McCorkle; and Libby Hancock