Three Effective Techniques for Brainstorming Ideas

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One of the most important skills for succeeding in school and in the workplace is coming up with new and creative ideas. The best ideas are the ones that solve problems or make our lives easier. While taking action is extremely important, without good ideas, those actions are ultimately good for nothing.

While people often think of ideas as coming from a mysterious muse—a random shock of inspiration—it is possible to effectively come up with ideas on a more consistent basis by recreating the conditions in which the greatest ideas arise. This article explores three of the best brainstorming techniques that the top marketers, designers, and inventors use to come up with new ideas—techniques that can be easily and effectively adapted for classroom use. Remember: the purpose of brainstorming is to come up with as many ideas as possible. The more ideas that we come up with, the more choices that are available for when we are ready to build.

1. **Post-It Throwdown**

IDEO, an international design and consulting firm founded in Palo Alto, California, is known for their out-of-the-box ideas and imaginative approaches to questions. One of their brainstorming techniques, aptly named the Post-It Throwdown, involves post-it notes, permanent markers, and a white board. This technique, which is used widely among design schools and firms, is demonstrated in the ABC special, *The Deep Dive*.

As with all brainstorming techniques, the idea is to create an environment in which there is no judgment. This means that when there is a new idea presented, participants are not allowed to discredit or turn down the idea. Of course, building upon ideas is encouraged. With the Post-It Throwdown, the purpose is to create as many ideas as possible within a short amount of time. The crazier the idea, the better.

**Step 1:** Gather all students into a circular arrangement.

**Step 2:** Equip each student with a permanent marker and a pile of post-it notes.

**Step 3:** Explain the goal of the brainstorm: Come up with ideas for _________.

**Step 4:** Encourage students to draw their ideas out as opposed to writing.

**Step 5:** Start the timer. Throwdown sessions are usually held to 10-15 minute intervals.

When a student comes up with an idea, they are to raise their post-it note and quickly explain their idea to the class. At this time, all students should stop drawing and pay attention to the new idea. Once the idea is presented, everyone goes back to drawing their ideas. This fast-paced brainstorming technique will yield many crazy ideas, and that is the purpose. It is then the teacher’s job to encourage students to build on ideas and turn them into reality.

2. **Do the Opposite**

This is a very counterintuitive brainstorming technique that can often yield many new creative ideas. There are two ways to use it. First, we can reverse the entire problem and brainstorm for that. Or second, we can reverse one aspect and do the opposite of what everyone else is doing.
To use the first technique:

Step 1: Write the problem or challenge that you wish to solve

Step 2: **Reverse the problem**.

Step 3: Brainstorm ideas for how to cause the problem.

Step 4: Use these causes as a point of discussion for new ideas

Example:

- **Problem**: How can we make it *easier* to wake up in the morning?
- **Reverse Problem**: How can we make it *more difficult* to wake up in the morning?

To use the second technique:

Step 1: State the detail for which we will brainstorm

Step 2: List what others are doing

Step 3: Brainstorm ways to do the complete opposite

Example:

- **Detail**: The way to turn off an alarm clock.
- **Others**: Alarm clocks usually require the user to push down to turn off the alarm sound.
- **Brainstorm**: Create an alarm clock that requires user to pull a handle. This forces the user to use both hands, thus increasing the chances of sustaining their wakefulness state.

Using both of these methods can help your students come up with ideas that are creative, innovative, and unexpected. It also forces them to challenge their set assumptions about the way the world works, which is key in developing innovations down the line.

3. Mindmapping

This is one of my favorite techniques for brainstorming due to its simplicity, ease of use, and the quickness with which users can get ideas out. Students will be able to think of surprising ideas at a rapid pace. The concept of mindmapping is not to think too much, but rather to output as many ideas as possible within a short amount of time.

To use this technique:

Step 1: Describe the problem in 1-3 words and circle it.

Step 2: Think of words that are related to the original word or idea. Write all of these words and circle them. Draw a line that connects them to the center.

Step 3: Once all ideas are exhausted for the first layer, go around and do the same for the related words. Do this until the paper is filled or until a good idea is found.
Use the mindmap to inspire and spark new ideas that otherwise would be difficult to come up with. This is a great tool for both ideation and thinking through confusing concepts. Teach this simple idea to your students and watch as their thinking clarity and thoughtfulness improve significantly.

Conclusion

Brainstorming is a skill that is useful for all aspects of life, whether in the personal, professional, or school life. The great thing is that it is not a matter of ingrained creativity, but rather of using specific techniques that can be repeated to reproduce ideas that are creative and thoughtful. The three techniques above should help your students yield many creative ideas both for specific tasks and in the ways they process the world around them.