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Building a Better Brainstorm

Geoffrey Gresk

Group brainstorming has a strong reputation in the language arts. From middle school to college, educators routinely have their students break up into groups at the start of a writing assignment and knock around ideas. Group brainstorming is seen as a way to break writer's block, a shot-in-the-arm for any creative process, and a tonic for the soul. People like brainstorming and brainstorming likes people.

And everything is great, aside from the fact that group brainstorming rarely works as well as it is perceived to. X number of individuals working alone will generate more and better ideas than X number of individuals working together. This statement is not based solely on personal experience. I am not quoting some obscure study. This is the finding of a survey of dozens of psychological studies on brainstorming, studies conducted over the course of 15 years in settings as diverse as Fortune 500 boardrooms and high school writing classes (Mullen, Johnson, and Salas). Subsequent analyses have found the same thing: group brainstorming is not effective (Brown & Paulus; Paulus & Paulus). (I am not critiquing brainstorming in general. A private, uninhibited listing in response to a prompt is an effective way to get a project rolling. My interest here is how the natural good of brainstorming is often impeded by working with others and how to obviate that waste. This article draws on social psychology research, which is by definition concerned with two or more people interacting.)

Play time, anticipated mediocrity and great expectations

"Nuh..unh" says the erstwhile teacher, the slip in vocabulary no doubt caused by the threatened personal values. "I have used brainstorming groups in the classroom, I have participated in them — they work," she protests. Good point: If brainstorming is ineffective, why is it perceived so positively?

First of all, these groups are fun (or at least closer to fun than sitting silently or being lectured to by the teacher). Without sounding too idiotic and/or deep, I can say that students like what they like. A social, enjoyable writing exercise (such as brainstorming) is more likely to be viewed as effective than is a less pleasurable exercise, even if the two are equally productive.

The second reason for group brainstorming's inflated reputation is that group members average their abilities when deciding how good their group work should be. When it is formed, a new group automatically, even subconsciously, sets its own standards. People intuitively know — or assume — that not everyone can do as well as the "smart kids" in the group. A student's internal monologue might go something like this: "Well, Johnny is not the smartest kid in the class, so he will probably slow our group down a little." This kind of thinking makes it okay if the group's output is of a lower quality than what the student knows she or he could produce alone. So the group establishes unspoken standards for their output. And so the groups work towards standards that are

lower than what many of the individuals would work towards if they were working alone (Paulus et. al.).

Finally, there is a weird self-fulfilling prophecy here. Because it has a good reputation, people expect group brainstorming to work and so it is *perceived* to work, regardless of the actual quality and number of ideas produced.

Reasons for failure

So brainstorming groups often fall flat. Why? There are several things going wrong here. First is the unfortunate fact that a human listening (really listening) to someone else speaking cannot think. We have all had the unfortunate experience of a brilliant idea popping into our head and fading just as fast while a colleague prattles on and on. Those who have persevered with this article up to this point may be keenly aware of what I am talking about. Aside from the person speaking at any given time, people in a brainstorming group are doing one of three things: thinking well, listening well, or simultaneously thinking badly and listening badly. Trying to balance politeness and productivity, most group brainstormers find themselves in the third condition (Stroebe & Diehl).

Social loafing is another killer of group brainstorming productivity. Social loafing is the phenomenon of an individual in a group putting forward less effort because she/he knows that others will pick up the slack. This is one cause of low motivation among group members (Kerr & Bruun).

The saddest saboteur of brainstorming is evaluation apprehension. Afraid of negative feedback from fellow group members, individuals censor themselves, minimizing their own contributions or remaining entirely dumb. We have all watched a group member who clearly has something to say, but will not share for fear of criticism. Considering that the most original thinkers are often the most sensitive, this is a grievous loss to the creative process. And creativity is what brainstorming is all about (Camacho & Paulus).

A new hope

If you work with groups during brainstorming, there are some things that you cannot change. Short of altering the neurological makeup of your students, there is little that you can do to help them listen and think at the same time. This unfortunate limitation will just have to be tolerated. But there is something you can do to counteract the other shortcomings of group brainstorming: rhyme. Yes, it is now time to rhyme. Fate has not only given us two ways to make group brainstorming as effective as it is believed to be, but two ways that are easy to remember. To make group brainstorming work, you must alternate and facilitate.

Encourage the group to switch back and forth between solo brainstorming and group brainstorming. This lets the writers have the best of both worlds. The potential for constructive peer-reviewing and the fun that come with brainstorming—two benefits that the research never doubted—will be complemented by the superior raw production of individual work. If you can manage it, split the class time that you have allotted to brainstorming evenly between the two approaches (Paulus & Paulus).

An even better option is *facilitated brainstorming*. In this approach, a facilitator (you) thwarts the enemies of classic brainstorming. The facilitator making sure that each idea is presented and (hopefully) built upon, but not immediately judged by the other members, stops evaluation apprehension. Calling on reticent individuals prevents them from hiding within the group. This stops social loafing. The reverse also holds true, with the facilitator heading off individuals who are dominating the group. A facilitator is also in the best position to balance fun with productivity), deciding where off-track becomes too off-track (Offner, Kramer and Winter). Using these techniques will help you make brainstorming the best it can be.

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About the Author

A recent graduate of Grand Valley State University, Geoffrey Gresk was a writing tutor for three years, and begins a Peace Corps assignment—teaching English—in May.