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The Eye of the Brainstorm: Transforming the Library through Creative Idea-Building

Lisa A. Forrest

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Abstract

Research indicates that most people have capabilities for creativity *if* creative abilities are allowed to develop (Moser-Wellman, 2002). How can librarians get in touch with their creative potential to help energize and transform their libraries? This article discusses best practices for the use of group brainstorming sessions to generate new ideas.

Keywords: creativity, brainstorming, creative group process, idea building, idea generation, libraries

Introduction

It is no secret that libraries are struggling with issues such as shrinking budgets, dwindling literacy skills, and increasing demands from patrons. Unfortunately, being aware of pertinent issues affecting the library is only half the battle; creative employees are needed to generate ideas that will provide *solutions* to the challenges libraries face.

Creativity—the ability to make connections from disparate sources into a new whole—is not exclusive to artistic types. Everyone has capabilities for creativity *if* creative abilities are allowed to develop (Moser-Wellman, 2002). Librarians are in a natural position of leadership to develop new ideas that could ultimately impact their entire organizations. Yet, many librarians appear uncomfortable with allowing their creative potential to completely surface. Literature on the general topic of creativity in libraries includes only a handful of substantial articles—even less has been written on the subject of the creative group process within the library. Most recently, Cunningham and Robison (2007) identify practices that hinder creativity and present strategies for the promotion of creativity. Fliss (2005) presents the need for creative collaboration on campus to

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better support teaching and learning. Black and Forro (1999) focus on the importance of workplace humor in relation to creativity.

How can librarians get in touch with their creative potential to help transform their library? The corporate world has long endorsed advertising executive Alex Osborn's brainstorming paradigm (1957) as a viable tool for the generation of original ideas. Osborn (1957), who is credited with inventing the process of group brainstorming, describes brainstorming as "using the brain to storm a creative problem—and to do so in commando fashion, with each stormer audaciously attacking the same objective" (p.80).

Although libraries are not advertising agencies, it makes sense for libraries to borrow from this business perspective to create new solutions to the problems facing libraries today. But where does one begin when attempting to develop innovative ideas through the group brainstorming process? Here are a few brainstorming practices gleaned from the literature and my personal experiences as a creative librarian at E. H. Butler Library (SUNY College at Buffalo).

Keep the Group Small

One of the common complaints of most group work is the imbalance of contribution by members; it is easy for group members to "free ride" on each other's ideas. To increase the chances of group productivity, it is recommended to include no more than five people in the brainstorming group (Moser-Wellman, 2002). Participation is not a choice when there are only a few people involved.

Have an Agenda

Prior to the meeting, the leader of the group process should provide an agenda, along with questions to answer (i.e. How can we increase gate count? How can we increase book circulation? What can we do to make the library more inviting?). This will allow group members to think about the issue, write down initial ideas, and prepare for the brainstorming process. As a stimulus to the creative process, it is recommended that the group leader provide materials associated with the issue at hand, such as complaint letters, statistics, or other physical evidence. (Moser-Wellman, 2002) It's important to remember that a brainstorming session is not a discussion or focus group. Brainstorming is an un-censored approach to motivating people to generate ideas.

Get Started

Once the question at hand is established, it is time to start brainstorming! Writing down ideas in marker on a flip chart is preferable to using a white board, as

you can take it with you when the meeting is over. Another advantage of using a flip chart is that it cannot be erased (you never know—that absurd idea could morph into the “right” idea).

Forget Logic

When it comes to brainstorming, the group’s first answer will likely be logical. For example, say the question is “How can we promote National Poetry Month?” The group’s initial response might involve a display of poetry books. But what *else* could be done? How about an open mike reading in the literature section? Could local poets pass out their poems at the door? Hide bookmark poems inside books? Write sidewalk poems? Have a song lyric contest? At our library, a campus-wide poetry project using discarded catalog cards morphed into the “[Rooftop Poetry Club](http://www.buffalostate.edu/library/rooftop) (<http://www.buffalostate.edu/library/rooftop>).” The poetry club, which began in 2005 with a spark of an idea to use the rooftop garden space of the library for poetry readings, has grown into one of the most vibrant literary venues in the community. Now boasting membership of over 100 students and community members, the club offers workshops, readings, poetry contests, and community art projects that use recycled library materials (such as card catalog cards, topographical maps, 35 mm slides, and old record albums). Through poetry we’ve found an innovative and affordable way to build unique relationships with our students, market the library, and promote the library’s literary resources. We’ve also managed to harness Web 2.0 technologies, including podcasting, YouTube, and blogging to advertise and archive the club’s many endeavors.

It’s Not Just Idea Collecting

Osborn’s brainstorming paradigm (1957) is designed to generate as many ideas as possible, without concern for quality, in hopes that these ideas will build upon one another. It is important to recognize that brainstorming is much more than *listing* ideas. Use the energy generated through small group brainstorming to allow ideas to merge, and ultimately create something entirely different. In our case, we had not associated the rooftop of the library with poetry—these two things didn’t obviously connect. But with a little imagination, we could perceive what *might* happen if we gave it a shot. Luckily, we were right. Little did I know that was only the beginning of many creative endeavors involving poetry and the library—I had not even thought of establishing an official club at the time of our initial meeting. Creativity is about making connections between two things that are not obviously associated with one another. For example, I wasn’t sure what to do with a box of 35mm art slides that was being discarded, but I intuitively knew that there was *some way* we could connect them with poetry. Following a brainstorming session with a fellow creative colleague, we were able to eventually

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transform a box of old slides into a multimedia community poetry project (<http://www.youtube.com/rooftoppoetryclub>). This semester, we are building upon the same idea by using discarded record albums as the fuel for yet another community poetry project.

Be Crazy

Brainstorming is a time when anything goes. Be sure to give all ideas equal opportunity, even if they do seem a bit off the wall. Setting a timed goal for the number of ideas to be obtained can help decrease self-censorship (Steig & Jones, 2002). Caggiano (1999) suggests asking questions that put the issue in a new light. For example, “How would the Coen brothers promote the library’s new 24/7 computer lab?” Could a film student create a video clip of the new lab to post on the library Web site? Could you find local actors or students to volunteer to perform in the film clip? It doesn’t matter how absurd the idea sounds—write it down!

Be Fair

When brainstorming, it’s useful to set a few common sense rules. The first should be that no member is allowed to mumble any self-fulfilling prophecies such as “I’m not a creative person” or “I can’t think of anything.” The second brainstorming rule should be to avoid the instant “no” response. It can take courage to get an idea out on the table, and it is much easier when there is no fear of being instantly rejected. Criticism should never be allowed during the brainstorming process (Osborn, 1957).

Stay Calm

It’s okay if there is a little friendly conflict during the brainstorming process. The truth is that differences can often lead to more possibilities and progress. If the group cannot arrive at a consensus, it is simply a sign that brainstorming needs to continue (Ricchiuto, 1996).

Nurture

Never underestimate the power of positive attitude on the group process. One study found that creative people *think* they are creative, while uncreative people *think* they are not (Swanson, 1997). It sounds elementary, but if you can get your colleagues to think of themselves as being creative, you can be instrumental in developing their creative abilities (Foster, 2001).

Why Not?

The first time I brought up the idea of hosting a poetry reading on the rooftop, it was met with little enthusiasm from my colleagues. But instead of getting disappointed over my idea not being wholeheartedly accepted, I tried it anyway. Do not be afraid to break the rules. Of course you need to think about the conditions (such as time, costs, manpower) needed for success, but often the “old rules” limit the number of solutions to a problem. Consider the classic “no food or drink in the library” rule, and how breaking it has led to the convenient trend of library cafes. Removing the rules (even hypothetically) can often lead to entirely new and creative possibilities.

Collaborate

Word to the wise: Find a few library cohorts (even *one* person) with whom you are able to connect creatively and support one another’s ideas. Collaboration can often lead to alternatives that you have never considered. We all know people who are so afraid of change that they instantly rebuke every idea. Do not be discouraged. Keep away from these toxic people if you can, and surround yourself with like-minded folks who are not afraid of using their imaginative powers for positive change.

Laugh

According to creative thinking experts, brainstorming is most successful when approached in a humorous way (Munson, 1998). This is because habitual thinking patterns are more likely to occur when stress is present, and humor can diminish stress and allow creative ideas to surface. A fellow creative colleague and I have collaborated on such things as writing a humorous sonnet to promote our Valentine’s Day sonnet contest, developing unique posters to market various events and collections, and creating a comic strip called “The Adventures of Captain Research and Wondering Woman.” We laugh at each other, other people, and at ourselves. Do not forget that we work in a *library*, not a morgue. “Wouldn’t it be funny if we created a library soap opera-tutorial called *As the Library Turns* or *Days of Our Library?*” Some of our best ideas have begun in complete jest.

Follow Up

Following your initial meeting, keep the flip chart posted in your office to allow colleagues to add their written ideas on sticky notes (note: setting an end date for thoughts to be submitted helps to keep people focused). Idea boards or “sticky note brainstorming” (Crandall, 1998) can be a great way to visually *combine* and improve upon ideas. A blog or electronic discussion board could also serve as a useful forum for discussing possibilities or issues that might arise during the implementation of the idea.

Don't Just Sit There

Have you ever known people who are so terrified of change or of failing that they simply do nothing at all? Brainstorming is just one of many creative strategies that librarians can use to energize and transform their libraries. What is the worst that can happen? A good place to start might just be to brainstorm *where* to start! At our library, we recently used a brainstorming session to identify innovative ideas for our library's strategic plan. We began by writing down some general categories (Public Relations, Physical Place, Virtual Space, Marketing, etc.) and then asked, “What ideas do you have to improve the library?” Remember, brainstorming is not simply listing ideas; good brainstorming sessions allow ideas to *build* upon other ideas. Thanks to the creative energies of my colleagues, we are now planning to transform our “copier lounge” into a public forum for students to share their scholarly and creative endeavors. What are you waiting for? Call a meeting with a few positive thinking co-workers, get out the flip chart and markers, and jump into the eye of the brainstorm!

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