

Creativity 101: Waking Up Your Whole Brain

Florence Bramley-Hill
Independent Consultant and Creativity Coach
Keyport, NJ

Welcome to the continuing adventure of accessing *your* creativity. Creativity: what an elusive concept. Defining it is difficult because (1) it is a multifaceted process, yet it seems to be validated only by the brilliant (or at least practical) solution to some problem, and (2) each person's experience of the creative process is unique.

We all remember an exciting moment when some brand new idea hit like a bolt of lightning. No doubt we felt very "creative" at that moment. The challenge is to find ways to insure that we will be able to generate many more ideas than we can possibly implement, giving ourselves a chance to choose the best ones for testing. It doesn't matter if a person is a painter struggling to depict a new sense of space or an exhibit interpreter trying to make a complex point to museum visitors in 100 words, or a student writing a paper, trying to pull diverse concepts together in a new way. All need to be able to rely on their ability to function optimally, i.e. be creative. The good news is that each individual's ability to improve the flow of ideas from his or her own brain can be greatly enhanced.

The tool for enhancing creativity that this paper addresses is an unusual brainstorming technique. For the sake of simplicity we are dealing with the problem-solving results of the creative process. However, the "problem" can be anything you choose: how many ways to explain what a shard of ancient pottery tells us about the culture that made it or where to go on vacation. The following exercises can help you become a more adept problem-solver. They were part of a high-energy participatory workshop at the 1995 Visitor Studies Conference in St. Paul and have been adapted for this proceedings format. The more you practice these techniques, the more you will be able to apply them to visitor-related challenges in your museum, botanical garden, animal park or other public educational area.

Understanding creative brainstorming techniques requires some background development. The sub-title for this paper, "waking up your whole brain," implies that you are familiar with the left-brain/right-brain dominance concepts. While scientists debate the precise location of stimulus and response in our brains, for the sake of simplicity, let us accept the more popular metaphors.

Introduction

A predominance of what we do in our professional lives falls within the realm of the left brain: lists, details, structure, focused implementation of ideas. However, in order to get the most out of our brains, it is important to get the right brain working simultaneously. The right brain is the more non-verbal, spontaneous side of our intelligence. Here is the home of artists of all sorts, and where as children we were more apt to "live." Development of our right-brain skills is essential to the effective use of our creative, problem-solving ability. *The Creative Brain* (Herrmann, 1990) explains and explores the dynamics of whole-brain development and is the basis of much of the understanding which led to this paper and to "A Crash Course in Creativity" (Bramley, 1994).

Now that we are professionals, if we think about the process by which we "matured" we may become aware that we laugh less frequently than we did as children (Bramley, 1993). Perhaps our color sense is more conservative than in our youth. Yet being generous with laughter and colors indicates a healthy spontaneity, the foundation for creatively solving the knottiest grown-up problems. How can we access this playful part of ourselves on an ongoing, adult basis?

First, enjoy our sense of humor. It doesn't matter which cartoons or anecdotes make us laugh. What makes one person laugh may not tickle the funny bone of anyone else in the office. However, for each person, a smile, chuckle, or guffaw stimulates the brain cells. The "Ha, ha!" comes from the same place as the "Aha!"

As we approach solving a current difficulty, we can try a technique that is gaining popularity. *Mapping Inner Space* by Margulies (1991) recommends using color as a tool for rerouting the old familiar patterns into new and exciting pathways. Ideally, a good box of crayons and a large newsprint pad are helpful for the early stages of brainstorming. The feel of crayons in the adult hand is so different from our usual writing implements that it tricks our brain into making new connections. The large motor activity also helps stimulate parts of the brain that typing (for instance) just cannot reach. However, the use of colored paper and colored pencils or pens is also conducive to waking up a slumbering right brain.

Even with all the tools we can find, creativity still goes through predictable and sometimes uncomfortable patterns. As we move from the identification of a problem to its solution, we move through this process many times. Brainstorming dances between the *Incubation and Illumination* aspects which follow *Preparation* or data gathering (Bramley, 1994) in each cycle of the creative process. It could also precede data gathering if the question posed were, "Where can we look for information on this puzzling challenge?"

Brainstorming: It's Play Time!

First, ask yourself a short question about some current situation you are facing (i.e. "How can we best use the available gallery space for the new exhibit on ____?" "What interests visitors of various ages about the subject of ____?"). Write your question on a piece of paper and put it aside. This is your personal Problem Question. You will use it later. If you play along with these exercises, in the order presented here, you will probably begin to experience a renewed vitality in your own thinking process. Let the crazy ideas flow and they will feed the more serious problem that comes later. The point is to put everything that comes to mind onto paper and to generate as many ideas as possible. This will dictate that you develop a short-hand of two or three-word phrases, rather than sentences describing your ideas. Don't get stuck on one idea, jot it down and move on.

What you will need:

- *Yourself* and, if possible, no more than five other adventurous people, one of whom will be your recorder,
- *Crayons* and large paper or colored paper, pencils and pens,
- *A stop-watch* or kitchen timer,
- *A "magic" envelope* containing small items or random pictures of people, food, machines, and nature.

Very Important Guidelines

Defer Judgment

Judgment—a negative judgment can turn into a positive inspiration; i. e., it can compensate for the difficulty. Positive judgment is insidious—the ideas that have not been praised are going to begin to dry up, so praise the *process*, not the ideas. Use words like "Thank you," "Keep 'em coming," "Great!" (not "great idea", just "great"). Do this for yourself as well. The greatest enemy to our creativity is the editor we constantly carry within us. For now, sit that editor in the corner (with tape over his or her mouth).

Suspend Criticism

Criticism—there is no such thing as "constructive criticism." Any criticism puts the targeted person into a conservative, protective frame of mind. It's human nature. So a good brainstorming session has only positive feedback which keeps the flow of ideas moving.

Free-wheel

Free-wheeling—*whatever* comes to mind, jot it down. Laughter is a good indication that you're waking up creativity. Write down all the ideas, even if bizarre. They may lead to a more "serious" solution later.

Quantity

Quantity—what about the second or third time an idea comes up? Write it down, again and again. It is in a *different* context. Let it flow.

For the duration of any brainstorming session believe that:

- You have all the money in the world.
- You have all the resources you need.
- You may defy the laws of nature.
- Any wishes at all can come true.

Brainstorm #1. Imagine that you have just pulled a picture of a banana out of your "magic" envelope.

- Problem: What would constitute a *perfect* banana? *Remember the guidelines.*
- 5 minutes. Set your timer. GO!
- How many ideas did you come up with? What happened? Did you slow down from time to time?

When you find you're slowing down, force a relationship between two dissimilar objects. This is where your "magic" envelope of random items or photos comes in very handy.

Brainstorm #2a: Forced Relationships (Firestein, 1995). If you are doing this in a group, you will need a new recorder. Pull a second picture out of your "magic" envelope. Let's imagine that it is of a tennis ball.

- Problem: How many relationships could you make between the banana and the tennis ball? (Let your mind come up with all sorts of connections that do exist, don't exist, never existed, might exist.) *Remember the guidelines.*
- 3 minutes. Set your timer. GO!
- How many ideas did you get this time?

Brainstorm #2b. At this point, go back to Brainstorm #1 and try it again. If you find yourself slowing down, force a relationship for a few seconds. This gets the mind to become unblocked quickly. Participants usually find that they double the ideas from the first time, in the same amount of time.

Here are just a few of the ideas generated by the participants in the Workshop for Brainstorm #1. A *perfect* banana would: peel as a purse, build houses, be a weapon, be a toy, double as a pencil box, be cheap house insulation, be pre-sliced, be very big, be very small, come in all sizes. Brainstorm #2: tennis balls that peel like bananas, bananas that bounce like tennis balls, play tennis with a banana then eat it (entertainment & refreshment in one), extract banana dye to tint tennis balls, fill up newlywed's car, banana playland at McDonald's.

What do bananas and tennis balls have to do with your original problem? (The one you wrote down and put aside.) Absolutely nothing. That's why these seemingly silly exercises are so important. Like the stretching exercises a runner will do before more serious exertion, these exercises get your brain warmed up. Now you are ready to get down to the work of attacking your "real" problem in a creative way.

Brainstorm #3. This is a three-part brainstorm, each part worked simultaneously. Fold a piece of paper to make 3 columns. Write your Problem Question across the top of the page and title the columns "Positives," "Difficulties," and "Off the Wall." If you are working in a group, each person makes his or her own "Brainstorm Form."

Considering that Brainstorming needs to be a positive process, it is easy to understand why the "Positives" column is important. However, it is also important to acknowledge any negative thoughts. Many of the "Difficulties" are just as true as the positives and present challenges to be overcome if the problem is to be solved.

The "Off the Wall" column is also critically important. Firestein tells a true story of a lamp factory. Production of the lamps was excellent but there was a bottleneck in the packing department. The lamps were being packed in newspapers and the packers were slowing things down by reading the newspapers. Management held a brainstorming session to confront this problem. Many ideas were presented, considered and rejected. But because it was a free-wheeling brainstorming session, the off-the-wall suggestion of "poke out the packers' eyes" had been written down. It turned out that the problem was solved with the hiring of blind workers. If that crazy comment had been edited out, such a perfect solution could not have been found.

Now it is time to work with your "real" problem. You will list everything you can think of about your problem. This may also include things you know you don't know, like how long it will take to complete the project. Try to put things in the column that seem the best "fit." If you find your mind wandering to "Aunt Millie's hat," jot that down in the "Off the Wall" column. The point is to put *everything* that comes to mind on paper. *Remember the guidelines.*

- Three minutes. Set your timer. GO!

Brainstorm #4, etc. Now you want to take a closer look at your ideas. Pick five of the best ideas from your finished Brainstorm Form.

At this point the guidelines are a little different; for each idea:

- Use Affirmative Judgment: You're looking at the ideas for their strengths.
- Be Deliberate: Ask yourself what potential application each idea has and what difficulties it might present.
- Consider Novelty
- Stay on Course
- Five minutes. Set your timer. GO!

What are some difficulties? For instance if you're designing a new exhibit, "handicapped access" may have been in your Difficulties column. In your next round of brainstorming, phrase this as a problem: "How can we improve handicapped access?" Brainstorm on each difficulty.

See how this works? The more specific you are, the more focused you're going to be. The more focused you are, the nearer you are to a solution. Improve visitorship . . . by having a Visitor Appreciation Day. If it costs a lot of money, brainstorm ways to reduce the cost. Prioritize the important Difficulties and work each one. Then brainstorm implementation. Develop a step-by-step plan of action. Keep working with Brainstorm #4 until you feel that the most important aspects of your problem have been addressed.

The banana exercises give you practice in this brainstorming technique and a chance to internalize the guidelines. If you work in a group, the exercises also give you a chance to have fun and build trust with each other. It is important to keep your group small. If six people want to participate, separate into two groups of three, then share your ideas later. In large, full-staff sessions, split into small groups, then every 30-40 minutes come together and share ideas. Divide again into small groups to continue the process until each detail has been explored and possible solutions considered. Don't forget to take breaks every couple of hours.

After you've spent the time brainstorming each detail, you can go to your boss. You'll be able to say, "Here's an idea we've been working on, here are its plusses, some potentials. and some difficulties you might see in it. Here's a tentative Plan of Action. When would you like to start?"

In Conclusion

You may have noticed that we've not taken more than 5 minutes for any of the brainstorming exercises. This is deliberate. Many brainstorming techniques become exhausting because they call on many people in turn (perhaps the whole staff) around a large table. People cannot help but wait self-consciously for their turn, and their minds cannot flow freely. The haphazard technique of everyone simultaneously doing the same work in small groups generates heightened spontaneity. Also, if forced to work for "only" 3-5 minutes, people find it easier to concentrate.

So, the next time you have a difficult, ever-so-adult problem to solve, get out your box of crayons, your "magic" envelope, and play!

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Suggested Resources For Developing Personal Creativity

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