

Tools for getting ideas and making plans

There are lots of tools and techniques useful for gathering ideas within groups of all ages, to involve everyone in planning processes. Here's a selection - from common types of 'ideas storm', through to more unusual creative methods.

Ideas storming

This is a quick and easy way of getting ideas out to start off the process. It doesn't matter at this stage if ideas might be difficult or unrealistic, so it's important that everyone feels everyone comfortable calling out and saying ideas off the top of their heads. It can be useful to remind the group that there are no right or wrong answers at this stage, to think big and wacky if they want to and to listen respectfully to everyone's contributions so that thoughts can flow freely. After getting lots of ideas out, you can then turn to discussing which are most practical, which might be problematic, and which should be discussed further.

Mindmaps (also can be called brainstorm and spider-diagrams)

Nominate a scribe. Write the title or question for discussion in a bubble in the centre of a big piece of paper. As people call out their ideas, draw line away from the central bubble with the idea on the end, creating a spider-like shape. Link further ideas and development on from their starting point so the spider grows outwards towards the edge of the paper.

Lists

Mindmaps don't work for everyone, some people prefer to see writing in a straight line, so lists are also useful for storming ideas. Use the same principles as with mindmaps, but ask the scribe to write each idea as a point in a big list.

Post-its ideas storm

Divide into smaller groups (can also work well in pairs, or working individually to start with) and give each one some post-it notes and a pen. Write the question or topic to be discussed on a visible flip-chart or board. Ask the groups to write their ideas on the post-its (one idea per post-it). Leaders collect the post-its from groups as they are generated and stick them up onto the flipchart / board or a wall, clustering similar ideas together. Once all the ideas are collected run through what you've got and the themes that have emerged through clustering them. There could be some discussion about the themes and grouping – the post-its can be easily moved if some clusters later need to be sub-divided, or individual ideas moved across.

Silent Floor

This works like a mindmap, but can go a bit deeper. Prepare for the activity by taping together several big sheets of paper and laying them down on the floor, like a big mat. Then, like a mindmap, write a question or topic in the centre. Group members then need to take their shoes off and find a marker pen. Everyone walks around the paper mat and writes their ideas coming off the central bubble. Keep moving around the paper, adding ideas onto other people's and drawing linking lines from one point to another, until the paper 'floor' is full of ideas that have been 'discussed' and explored within the group mindmap. For this activity to work best, the group needs to be really quiet (silent, if possible). That way, everyone has space to think and can work as an individual, but interact with the shower of thoughts coming from the entire group. When the paper is full, take a step back and break the silence. Then as a group, try to feedback the ideas on the paper and summarise what you've come up with.

Planning

The following activities involve a little more discussion and so, while they can be used to storm initial ideas, they can also be useful in helping to develop ideas further and make a clearer plan.

Collage

Work in small groups to create collages from newspaper and magazine cuttings to illustrate ideas, plans, scenarios or settings. This can also be a useful tool to use when thinking about particular environments or audiences. You'll need a good variety of old magazines and papers, scissors, glue and big sheets of paper to back the collages. It's also helpful to give a pretty clear question and task to focus the groups' work. Then they can think about how to address that, discuss their ideas and go through the resources to find ways of showing that.

Group artwork

A big mat of paper is also needed for this activity – either laid on the floor or pinned on the wall. You'll also need to provide art materials. Give the group a theme (e.g. 'the most amazing district camp ever would be...') and then explore ideas by painting and drawing a massive group picture. You could either discuss ideas first so you start painting with a coherent vision, or just get stuck in with the artwork, talking as you go along, responding to what other people are creating and see what emerges in the end.

Visual timeline

To plan a big project, an event (like a camp or a day-long fete) or even a term's programme, making a visual timeline is a good way of involving everyone in mapping it out. Use a long piece of string and tape it in a line (straight – or wiggly, as below) to the wall or floor. Using colourful paper or card, label any firmly fixed points along the line - such as the different days, or meal times for a camp, or events you want to link with in a term's programme, e.g. Refugee Week. Then take the ideas that have come out of earlier ideas storming planning activities, write or draw them on to individual cards and as a group decide where they should sit along the timeline. Keep shuffling everything around until the group is happy with their plan.



A visual timeline created by the TREE Steering Group (Pioneers, Venturers, DFs and Adults) to plan the programme's activity for 2010. The cluster in the left-hand side of the picture represents the busy summer period with lots of activity planned at events such as Annual Gathering and Venturer Camp.

Making decisions

Dot voting

Write up a range of options (either as a list on one big sheet of paper, or on separate sheets spread around the room), leaving space on the paper by each item. Give everyone 3 sticky dots (or another appropriate number) and ask them to stick their dots next to their favourite options to cast their votes.

Continuum of agreement

Set up an imaginary line across the room, clearly marking where it begins and ends – for example, with chairs, signs or masking tape on the floor. This is a 'continuum', with two opposing views at each end. One end represents 'strongly agree' and the other, 'strongly disagree' (it could be helpful to label these). Read a series of statements, and after each one, the group needs to shuffle themselves about so they are standing at the point along the line that represents how they feel about the statement. You could ask a few people to explain why they stood where they did, or just move straight onto the next question. This can be a useful way to see where a group stands on different issues, the spread of opinion, can trigger dynamic discussion and can even be used as a way of voting. It can also be a good starter activity for sessions on controversial issues and values-based discussions.



DFs place themselves along a continuum during a workshop in the woods at DF Camp 2009.

Temperature check:

This is a really simple tool that can be used in lots of different contexts. A temperature check is a quick way of measuring levels of feeling within a group, large or small. It could indicate how happy people are with some new material, how much they agree with a suggestion, how excited they are about an idea, and more. Very simply, members of the group respond to the question – e.g. 'how much do you agree with this?' – by raising their hands and wiggling their fingers right above their heads to indicate strong agreement, nearer their chins for half-way, down by their knees for strong disagreement and anywhere in between to represent a variety of part-way emotions. Temperature checks can be taken as a group at intervals during discussions or activities or just at the end to conclude. Alternatively, individuals could use these signs themselves whenever they want to signal their agreement or disagreement with something.