Brainstorming

What is brainstorming?

Brainstorming is a large or small group activity that encourages students to focus on a topic and contribute to the free flow of ideas.

1. The teacher may begin a brainstorming session by posing a question or a problem, or by introducing a topic.
2. Students then express possible answers, relevant words and ideas.
3. Contributions are accepted without criticism or judgement and usually summarised on a whiteboard by the teacher or a scribe as the ideas are called out.
4. These ideas are then examined, usually in a open class Discussion format.

Why use brainstorming?

By expressing ideas and listening to what others say, students adjust their previous knowledge or understanding, accommodate new information and increase their levels of awareness. Brainstorming's main purposes are to:

- focus students' attention on a particular topic
- generate a quantity of ideas
- teach acceptance and respect for individual differences
- encourage learners to take risks in sharing their ideas and opinions
- demonstrate to students that their knowledge and their language abilities are valued and accepted
- introduce the practice of idea collection prior to beginning tasks such as writing or solving problems
- provide an opportunity for students to share ideas and expand their existing knowledge by building on each other's contributions.

Common issues using brainstorming

Initially, some students may be reluctant to speak out in a group setting, but brainstorming is an open sharing activity which encourages all students to participate. Teachers should emphasise active listening during these sessions.
Students should be encouraged to:

- listen carefully and politely to what their classmates contribute
- tell the speakers or the teacher when they cannot hear others clearly and
- think of different suggestions or responses to share.

Effective brainstorming: how do I achieve it?

1) In a small or large group select a leader and a scribe (or this may be the teacher).

2) Define the problem or idea to be brainstormed. Make sure everyone is clear on the topic being explored.

3) Set up the rules for the session. They should include:
   - letting the leader have control
   - allowing everyone to contribute
   - suspending evaluation of ideas until all ideas are gathered
   - the validity of all contributions
   - recording each answer, unless it is a repeat
   - setting a time limit and stopping when that time is up.

4) Start the brainstorming. Have the leader select members of the group to share their answers. The scribe should write down all responses, if possible so that everyone can see them. Make sure not to evaluate or criticise any answers until the brainstorming is complete.

5) Once you have finished brainstorming, go through the results and begin evaluating the responses. This can be done quickly by a show of hands to rank the ideas.

6) Some initial qualities to look for when examining the responses include:
   - looking for any answers that are repeated or similar
   - grouping similar concepts together
   - eliminating responses that definitely do not fit

7) Now that you have narrowed your list down somewhat, discuss the remaining responses as a group.

It is important for the teacher to:

- establish a warm, supportive environment
- emphasise that a quantity rather than the quality of ideas is the goal, and that it's okay for students to think outside the box
- discourage evaluative or critical comments from peers during the ideas-gathering phase
• encourage and provide opportunity for all students to participate
• initially emphasise the importance of listening to expressed ideas, and model printing and recording of the ideas, then read each contribution to the group.

How can I adapt brainstorming?

• Use this procedure to plan a classroom activity such as a research project, a field trip, a concert or a party.
• Groups and individuals can use brainstorming to generate pre-writing ideas for projects or assignments.
• Categorise brainstormed words, ideas and suggestions.
• Use brainstormed words and sentences for exploring discipline-based jargon.

Resources (external)

• Brainstorming - Generating many radical ideas
• The Step by Step Guide to Brainstorming
• Brainstorming: Helping students generate ideas
• Creative Brainstorming Ideas