

Chapter 2

Making Sense of Brainstorming in Transnational Education: The Challenge of Contextualization

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ABSTRACT

The chapter investigates the role of brainstorming as an educational tool on the basis of the author's experience in transnational education, and a review of the literature. Brainstorming is an ideation technique invented by Alex Osborn in the 40s. Still popular today, it has found numerous applications in education. Despite its diffusion, a large body of literature dismisses brainstorming as less effective in comparison to individuals working alone or other techniques in terms of quantity and quality of idea produced. Advocates of brainstorming claim that when done properly it can be very powerful in generating breakthrough ideas, and studies show that factors such as the presence of a facilitator, training, and the right time and type of problem assigned can greatly change the outcome of a session. After reviewing this contrasting literature, the author concludes that these studies ignore the cultural origin of brainstorming and attention should be paid to the cultural implications of the technique in transnational contexts outside the US.

INTRODUCTION

Picture this: a group of six individuals seating around a table led by a facilitator. The facilitator introduces the discussion topic in the form of a question: “How might we boost the number of visitors to the zoo?”. He provides some context on the problem as well (e.g., visitors numbers are declining). The participants start writing down ideas to answer this challenge on post-it notes (one idea, one post-it) and they hand them to the facilitator reading them aloud for everyone to hear. The facilitator puts them on a board and keeps encouraging the group to strive for quantity. By the end of the session there are around 55 ideas on the board and the facilitator announces the next step: looking for themes and clusters among them.

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This is the description of a mock brainstorming session made publicly available by design firm IDEO (IDEO U, 2019), a strong advocate of this ideation technique (Kelley & Littman, 2001, 2005). Originated in an advertising firm in New York, brainstorming has been around at least since the late 30s of the last century and has found applications in an impressive number of contexts, from business to design, from accounting to our focus, education, just to name a few. In 1961 the term “brainstorming” entered the *Webster’s Dictionary* with the meaning of “a conference technique by which a group attempts to find a solution for a specific problem by amassing all the ideas spontaneously contributed by its members” (quoted in Mareis, 2020). Previously, perhaps interestingly, it had indicated a violent state of mind (Mareis, 2020; Rickards, 1999).

The goal of this chapter is twofold. First, the chapter aims at bridging the gap in the educational literature between the studies of brainstorming as an ideation technique and its applications in education. Second, the chapter aims at reflecting on the use of brainstorming outside its context of origin, the US, specifically in transnational settings. The chapter will begin with introducing brainstorming and its current applications in education. Then, it will present a summary of the literature both against the effectiveness of brainstorming as an ideation technique and in favor. The chapter will argue that this knowledge is essential for educators using brainstorming in transnational education and will conclude with some practical recommendations.

The author’s experience with brainstorming is grounded in the setting of transnational education in Vietnam (2010-2016) and China (2017-present) working with learners from foundation year to executive level using English as medium of instruction. Transnational education has been defined as the “offering overseas of a ‘home university’ course and award” and it often involves teaching to students in a language different from their native tongue (Stafford & Taylor, 2016). The context of transnational education often leads to replicate the pedagogical approaches of the ‘home institution’ in a new setting. Whether and to what degree the curriculum and the pedagogical approaches of a transnational program should adapt to the cultural variables of the local context is a debated issue in the literature (Wallace & Dunn, 2008) with educators on the ground often holding different beliefs of what work (Magne et al., 2017). While it has been acknowledged that in transnational education “the curriculum is subject to new kinds of pressures for contextual relevance” (Chapman & Pyvis, 2013, p. xi), contextualization often does not go beyond the superficial level of introducing local examples, with pedagogical approaches remaining unquestioned. Brainstorming is a remarkable example of this tendency. A reflection around brainstorming is then interesting as an example of an American thinking tool often uncritically employed in widely new contexts. One might argue that the challenge to contextualize brainstorming reflects at a micro-level the wider challenge of contextualizing transnational education in a host country.

BRAINSTORMING ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION

The originator of brainstorming is undisputed: his name is Alex Osborn, one of the founders of Madison Avenue advertising agency BBDO. According to his account, Osborn began using it in 1939 to tackle clients’ problems with his creative teams. Many articles mention his book *Applied Imagination* as the first written description of the process (Diehl & Stroebe, 1991; B. Mullen et al., 1991; Sutton & Hargadon, 1996). However, the idea of brainstorming is first introduced in his 1942 book *How to Think Up* (Chapter 4) and is fully articulated in the precursor of *Applied Imagination*, a 1948 self-help book titled *Your Creative Power*. Here Osborn defined brainstorming as “using the *brain* to *storm* a creative

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