

Excursions and Metaphors – Getting crazy ideas, and turning them into brilliant solutions

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Excursions and metaphors are among the most powerful – and fun – techniques in the well structured synectics process. Excursions are used to help participants to create some distance from the task, to come up with really way-out ideas with potential for novel solutions.

Metaphors are a tool to “play with” word pictures contained in these seemingly “crazy” ideas, make associations, and link them back to the original task – until they become workable, leading to action plans that deliver new solutions, often including real break-throughs.

Overview of the SynNovation approach

The synectics approach, developed in Boston, US, has been used successfully worldwide since 1960 to facilitate innovation. Since 1996 we have used the process in South Africa, initially as a subsidiary of Synectics Inc; and since 2001 as SynNovation. We have adapted the approach in various ways. It consists mainly of a way to create a climate in which it is easy for people to suggest novel ideas, a set of groundrules to achieve this, a powerful yet flexible process to tackle tasks, and several techniques that promote not only creativity, but also practical action plans and effective, collaborative implementation. (We use “synectics” for the widely-recognised body of knowledge, and “Synectics” as the name of the consulting firm.)

The power of diversity

For creative problem solving we bring together people who can provide different perspectives, and thus suggest a wide range of possible solutions. People close to a problem are often like someone in a hole – the more they grapple with the task, the deeper they dig themselves into the hole, the more aware they are of what “can’t work”. Outsiders, who are not in the hole, are valuable resources who can see new solutions or possibilities (like passing a rope-ladder into the hole). So for innovation, outside experts, customers, suppliers, people from other departments, and even outsiders who are “naïve” regarding the task in hand, can provide valuable fresh approaches and new insights.

Creating a collaborative – not competitive – climate

In many groups or organisations, challenging others’ ideas is part of the “competitive” culture. It is often viewed as the best way to test how good an idea is. “If you can’t shoot it down, it must be a good idea”. So, in many groups, people shoot down one another’s ideas without realising the impact on getting new ideas, and on co-operation. This often means that more energy and time goes into point-scoring and protecting turf, than into problem-solving. In synectics / SynNovation type workshops, participants learn instead to develop a climate where they credit one another’s ideas and build on them, using simple ground rules that promote collaboration and mutual support. In this open climate, people feel emotionally safe to produce rich new ideas and build on others’ ideas – while they have fun as a bonus. Usually, people continue to work in this constructive way long after workshops, as it is enjoyable, less stressful and more productive.

When the synectics process was developed, the founders discovered that some “positive” behaviours (such as being optimistic, joining, listening, setting up win-wins, valuing the learning in mistakes, protecting vulnerable beginnings) increase the chances of collaboration and successful innovation. However, “negative” behaviours (such as questioning, being judgemental, critical, bored, dominant, competitive, pulling rank, discounting, putting down, cross-examining, questioning) get in the way of innovation and creative new solutions. When shown a diagram of the latter behaviours, a CEO said “Unfortunately that is the default behaviour of most South African managers”. We encourage the positive behaviours by both ground rules and the style of facilitation.

We would like to share with you examples of the unique techniques Excursions and Metaphors. They unleash creative thinking, add to the fun that helps to change the climate and behaviour to positive and collaborative, and thus help to produce great solutions. To achieve this, we will

- Give you the “how and why” of excursions and metaphors
- Give examples from reports on real life workshops in a variety of organisations to show how we play with metaphors to turn fun ideas developed from different excursions into workable “emerging ideas”. In one case we also show how we take an idea through to an action plan.
- Provide a brief overview of the nine steps in the overall process, for those that do not know the synectics or SynNovation process. Figure 1, at the end of the chapter, shows a simplified diagram of the process, and where excursions and metaphors fit in it. (pages 15 to 17.)

THE “HOW AND WHY” OF EXCURSIONS AND METAPHORS

The value and use of excursions

Excursion is one of the most powerful techniques used to enhance creativity in problem solving, and to increase the chances of producing really innovative ideas – used mainly in the Idea Generation phase at Step 3. It helps you to create distance between yourself and the task in order to get new thinking. While working on a problem, people often get stuck for ideas. Usually, fresh ideas only come when one is mentally removed from the problem, like doing something else or “sleeping on it”. With excursions we recreate at will, and in a few minutes, the effect of “sleeping on the problem.”

Excursions allow you to create distance from the problem mentally, rather than physically, by temporarily putting it out of your mind and thinking about something else for a few minutes. They are thus very time-efficient.

Some experts’ views on the value of excursions

According to Einstein, “Problems can't be solved by thinking within the framework in which the problems were created”. In order to get new thinking, you need to use your mind differently, learn to play around with thoughts, associations, feelings, mental pictures, objects, and movements.

Synectics co-founder George Prince regards excursions as one of the four most important contributions of the synectics approach. He would never dream of doing a session without one or more excursions – not only because they triggered more unusual ideas, but also because of their contribution towards creating a climate of collaboration and fun. (The others he mentioned were Selecting ideas that are intriguing and not feasible, and then using metaphors and action suggestions to help to turn them into really powerful solutions; The ground rule “Assume positive intent” and other tools to help create a positive and idea-friendly climate; and Constructive Evaluation.)

Vincent Nolan, who took Synectics to the UK and Europe, gives another testimony to the value of excursions. “On occasion, we worked on conflict resolution with representatives of six international governmental organisations. Early on, we introduced a collage-building exercise in small groups. One participant, a Ph.D. and graduate of Ecole National d'Administration, said ‘I do not want to do this – it is childish!’ We told him ‘If you do what you always do, you get what you always got. What you have got is deadlock. Now go and do something different’. He went, and the excursion produced a major breakthrough. (A senior vice-president with 30 years’ experience of the group said, ‘I would never have believed it possible.’)”

How to use excursions

All excursions have the following three steps in common:

1. Put the problem out of your mind.
2. Create new raw material that seemingly has no connection with the problem, and note all thoughts, feelings and associations on clipboards or notepads.
3. Use the raw material generated as a stimulus for new thinking on possible approaches to the task in hand, by making connections or links from the excursion to the task.

Below is a list of a few tried and tested excursions – although of course it is also fun to develop your own. The choice of excursion will depend on the nature of the problem and of the group, how close the group or individual is to the problem, and how long the problem has existed.

The examples given later on, recorded in real sessions, show some “wild” or intriguing ideas generated from excursions during Step 3 of the process. Many of these excursions can also be used on their own, using the same 3 steps, when grappling with a problem alone or in a group.

Types of excursions

Unfocused excursions – used in Idea Generation, to move you away from the task

These excursions can spark ideas completely unrelated to the task, and offer a wide range of stimuli for new ideas.

1. Cut-and-paste – Collage excursion

Group members make a montage of cut-outs from magazines, in pairs or small groups, given a theme, and scissors, glue and a flipchart page. (Usually a group activity which is also a great ice-breaker, or can be used to develop a shared vision – see the quote from Vincent Nolan above).

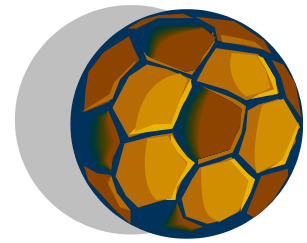
2. Line Drawing

Someone in the group starts by drawing a line of any description (straight, squiggly, circular, etc.) on a flipchart. Each person following draws a line, again of any description, which must touch the preceding line, but not cross it or any other line, and so on until everyone has had several chances, and the group feels the ‘drawing’ is complete. (Flip chart and various colour pens needed.) Any picture, however primitive, is acceptable. The group then looks at the picture and all note associations, which they use to generate springboards.

3. Street or garden excursion

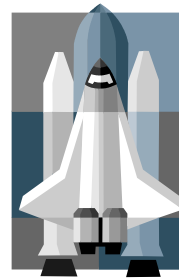
Group members go out into the surrounding area, garden, a street or a shop, and pick up, and bring back items and / or observations that catch their attention. The group shares these, and makes connections between the outing and the task on which they are working. We had a workshop in a

game resort, and took a game drive as an excursion. People came back with many associations that provided new ideas for a task related to the firm's survival, learning from survival in nature.



4. Career Excursion

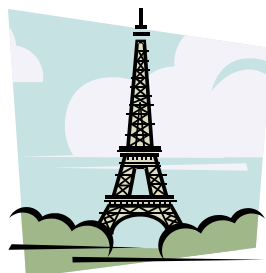
Each group member is given a new persona, career or role, e.g. Michael Schumacher, IT expert, astronaut, veterinarian, deep sea diver, Zulu warrior, garbage collector, Nelson Mandela, Madonna, sculptor, prostitute, child in nursery school, Dolly Parton, mother of 10 kids, Mother Theresa, Bill Clinton, barman, cowboy, Mafioso, famous chef, gangster, etc.



Ask them to forget about the problem, think about their role or character, and make notes of the images and associations it triggers – how that character lives and works, what problems they face, how they handle them. After 2 to 3 minutes thinking about their character, the group returns to the task they were working on. All make connections between their associations and images and the task, and suggest new springboards.

5. Pictures excursion

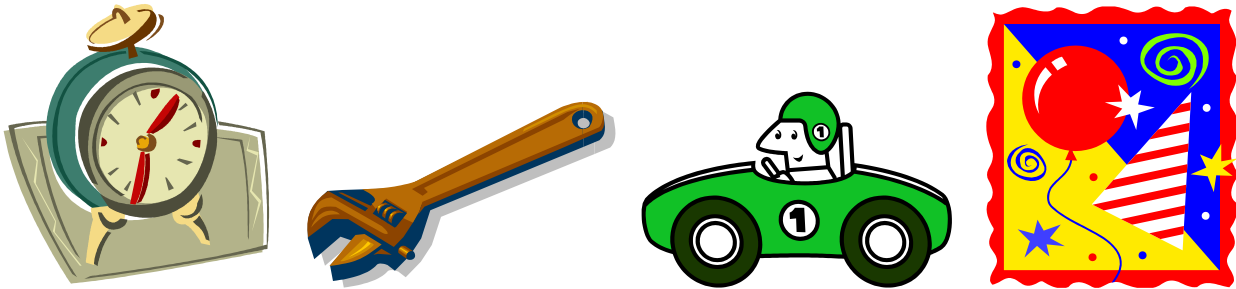
Let individuals look at pictures (postcards, artworks, paintings around the building, brochures, in magazines – but avoid that they read). They jot down thoughts, and then come back to the task, and generate new ideas, again starting with “I wish” and sharing the sources of ideas.



6. “Things” and “Ideas bags” or “Rummage bags”

Have a collection of simple gadgets, watches, tools, toys or things with which group members can play, that will stimulate various senses and associations. Put these in a covered basket, large bowl or box, so that each person feels around and takes out a “lucky dip” of two or three items to explore.

We usually make up “Ideas bags” or “Rummage bags” by putting say 20 small items (small toys, balloons, sweets, matches, elastic bands, cotton-wool, whistles, sugar, salt, erasers, condoms, textiles, teaspoons, beads, buttons, perfume, paperclips, hotel or airline give-aways) into a small bag. People each get a bag and explore with all their senses, feeling around and shaking before looking, and making notes. They then link these associations back to the task, with springboards and background. We find this the most powerful excursion, as it taps into different senses and gives many triggers. We usually keep this for the most difficult problem during a multi-session workshop.



7. Personal Analogy or Identification

People identify themselves with an object in the room, or select something as a metaphor for themselves– imagining they are an inanimate thing, e.g. a clock, lead in a pencil, the hub of a wheel, a piece of pasta from raw through cooking to being eaten, a light bulb, a vehicle, an animal. They jot down whatever passes through their minds, and then use these associations to build new ideas.

8. Listening for ideas – Associative listening

The synectics ground rule “Listen for ideas” is also a mini-excursion. Participants learn to make random associations and connections as the task owner states the problem, or as others give background to their springboards – jot down on their clipboards or notepads any thoughts they have, and then build new ideas from these “loose thoughts”. Surprisingly, they still have enough, and sometimes even better, understanding of what others say if they practise associative listening.

9. Music – to listen for ideas, or videos and DVDs as multi-sense stimulus

We used unusual music as an excursion or thought-trigger in a workshop in which we had a blind participant (with everyone listening with eyes closed). It worked well for everyone, and the blind man said “My colleagues tapped into part of their brains they do not usually use”. We sometimes have people look out of the window while they listen to a CD. Short clips from videos or DVDs can also be a powerful excursion.

Focused excursion: the example excursion (used in “bottom half” of process, in Step 6 or Step 8)

This excursion takes you only a little distance from the problem. In the group process, this is used mainly in Idea Development. It is also a useful technique to use on one’s own to gain new perspectives. Say for example one needs to find a new way to establish a company identity, think of two unrelated worlds. Think of ways people in these fields might deal with the issue of identity.

The steps are

1. Identify the essence of what you are looking for (the need or “activity”) in a word or short phrase on the flip chart, e.g. *survival*, *selling an idea*, *getting resources*. Ask the group to give examples of actions to address this need from two “worlds” unrelated to the task, such as Nature, Religion, Science, Literature, Business, Politics, the Criminal world, Performing arts, Sport.
2. List the examples from each world in a column on a flip chart, or on paper if working alone.
3. Return to the task being worked on and use “examples” from the other worlds as stimuli for new ideas or suggested actions, starting ideas with a verb, such as “Research...”, “Explore...”, “Find...”.

The value and use of Metaphors

Metaphors are the secret key to unlocking the treasures of newness hidden in seemingly “crazy, ridiculous, intriguing” ideas. In a way, metaphors are also “focused excursions” used in the Idea Development part of the process, in Step 5, to both trigger new ideas, and add fun.

Metaphors are also very powerful, and memorable. Eight years ago, a woman entrepreneur’s firm was in crisis, and we were asked to help. Under pressure, she had become very autocratic. In a workshop with all staff, one of the wishes that came out, after a Career Excursion, was “I wish we could shoot the person causing the problems. Background – I was a mercenary in the Congo, and mercenaries shoot their problems.” And this was selected as an intriguing idea! I explained to my client (who had been absent from that session) that we do not always take springboards literally, and that I had encouraged way-out or illegal ideas. She immediately had the insight – “My therapist said I must not be like a sergeant-major with my staff. I must not shoot myself, but the sergeant-major. I must get more distance between myself and the staff, I must not always meddle in everything, I must delegate more. I can work from home, and the middle managers can call me when they need me.” The metaphor made the message far more powerful than it would have been if I as a consultant had cleverly told her “You must delegate more.” The good news is that that firm is now very successful, and the woman has received several awards as an entrepreneur.

How to use metaphors

The metaphor focuses on one aspect – the metaphor in the selected springboard – rather than on a wide range of unrelated stimuli. The steps are similar to those used in excursions. Take a key word or concept from the selected “undoable” idea, forget about the task as the group generates 10 to 20 words associated with the metaphor. Then from the words listed, build links to the task to form new practical ideas. These now start with verbs or “do” words, rather than “wishes” as used in the Idea Generation phase.

Metaphors can also be used by individuals to describe themselves or their team or company. Then they are used more as an ice breaker or a visioning tool, than as an idea generating technique.

EXAMPLES OF FROM WORKSHOPS: USING METAPHORS TO TURN WAY-OUT SPRINGBOARDS INTO EMERGING IDEAS AND ACTION PLANS

We will now share with you extracts from reports of facilitated SynNovation workshops, where “crazy” ideas were generated as springboards after excursions, and metaphors were used to turn them into useful – in some cases break-through – “emerging ideas”, and then into action plans.

Please note that we recorded verbatim, under different process headings, every thought or idea put forward (but not the background given), and all of this was included in the full report. We show the action plan only with the first example, but in all the sessions the process was completed through all steps up to action plan.

EXAMPLE 1 USING A PICTURE EXCURSION, WITH CONSTRUCTIVE EVALUATION AND ACTION PLAN

The client was an agricultural research division in a Government department, where two sections had recently been merged, with the usual stresses and conflicts caused by mergers. We were brought in to help address the conflict. The 2-day workshop did much to build positive relations and trust, in addition to producing action plans to work together in new ways on real problems.

Step 1. Task Headline

How can we improve funding to expand research projects and scope; and how do we focus our research and identify funding and resources to enable it?

Step 3. Springboards

We listed 34 springboards, and show some listed after the picture excursion – each of which could have lent itself to a rich metaphor.

- I wish we were more like the Bushmen
- I wish we could be as colourful as South Africa
- I wish we were hairy rhinos
- I wish we could be elephants in a pool
- I wish I was a fish
- I wish I was Father Christmas
- I wish Africa was turned upside down
- I wish rainbows could glow at night

Step 4. Selection

Selection 1: Springboard 30: I wish Africa was turned upside down

Selection 2: Springboard 33: I wish rainbows could glow at night

Step 5a Metaphor

Selection 1 We unpacked the metaphor, “turn Africa upside down”

Words / Phrases associated with “turn Africa upside down” (*Words used for links in Italics*)

<i>Closer to Europe</i>	Mixed up	Outflow	Camels
Colony	<i>Desert</i>	St Tropez	Ryan Air
Pyramids	<i>Culture</i>	<i>Vulture</i>	Paris to Cape
<i>Friends & neighbours</i>	Magic	<i>Madiba</i>	Al Q’aida
Dakar to Cape Town	<i>Past to Future</i>	Quick flights	Continental drift
Low levels of Innovation	<i>Copycat</i>	Light Africa	<i>Piggyback</i>

Step 5b Suggested links to task – moving towards an Emerging idea (Link words in Italics)i

1. Forget *past*, move towards a bright *future*
2. *Relationships* with *neighbouring* states (Share in money from donors in *Europe*)
3. *Piggyback* on past successes
4. Get *Madiba (Mandela)* on fund raising team

5. Create *culture* to become opportunity *vultures*
6. Build links with research institutes in *Europe*
7. Use knowledge of the *past* to *build the future*
8. Patent break-through ideas to make money
9. Work in areas where not much has been done yet, such as *desert*
10. *Copy research done in Europe*, adapt to local conditions to create new knowledge.

Step 7. Emerging Idea

I plan to make full use of what we have, build on it, and build linkages with overseas researchers. Broaden to other related areas of science, e.g. environment, dry areas. Take ideas from overseas – adapt, shift to local conditions. Build financial and people capacity. Budget for regular overseas conference attendance by our staff, and invite researchers from Europe to come and work with us.

Step 8. Constructive Evaluation

8a Positives / benefits

1. Linking expertise internally and internationally
2. Optimising existing resources
3. Optimising funding
4. It will be exciting
5. It will help us to focus research
6. Personal development
7. Establish own identity
8. Enhance job satisfaction
9. State of the art, updated equipment
10. Improve career paths
11. Opportunity for overseas travel
12. Will ensure long-term planning
13. Stimulate cross-fertilisation
14. Opportunity to establish a trust fund

8b Concerns

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. How to deal with currency fluctuations | → | C |
| 2. How to ensure that trust funds are managed for the good of the entire division | → | C |
| 3. How to facilitate funding within the Government structures | → | C |
| 4. How to make ourselves networking fit | ← | A |
| 5. How to convince Senior Management that this is the way to go | ← | B |
| 6. How to sell and promote the skills and expertise of each researcher | ← | A |

8c **A, B, C, D** indicate the priorities of the concerns, or order of importance.

8d Actions to overcome A, i.e. concerns 4 and 6, which go together

1. Develop teams within the Division to work on specific projects
2. Learn to network – both scientifically, and to obtain funding
3. Share expertise, both among team, and internationally
4. Keep track of current issues, write opinions – scientific and popular
5. Develop a visibility plan for the Division

6. Monthly meetings where researchers with technicians report on what they are doing – ask inputs, help, etc. Brief presentations using “Headline & background”.
7. Target conferences and exhibitions – to present papers, just attend, and / or have own exhibits
8. Decide to what extent, when, with whom we will initiate international networking
9. Ensure right standard and focus for projects to justify visibility
10. Ensure Division is represented on relevant committees.

Actions to overcome B, i.e. concern 5

11. Find ways to deal with obstructions in red tape, e.g. overseas trips
12. Make Top Management aware of value added by us as researchers, and of purpose and benefits of visits
13. Invite Top Management to attend meetings where we share research – get our bosses enthusiastic about our work, annual meetings
14. Realise we must convince them of new era research, development work we are doing
15. Have policy to send researchers on overseas trips regularly – on merit, reward system. Plan year’s trips ahead to give global picture to Minister to lobby for budget
16. Ensure “invited speakers” have right to go
17. Get clarity on Government’s views regarding research as a priority.

Actions to overcome C, i.e. concerns 1, 2, 3

The group felt that the concerns dealt with above were the most important, and if they are handled well, Concerns 2. and 3. would to some extent fall into place; while not much could be done about Concern 1, a fact of life in South Africa.

Step 9. Action Plan (Items from Links (Step 5b) and Springboards (Step 3) can be added)

Action Item	Key Words	Who	With	When
1, 9	Develop teams, ensure standard – visibility			
2	Networking skills			
3, 6	Meetings to share expertise			
4	Keeping track, writing on current issues			
5	Visibility plan			
7, 8, 10	Conferences, committees, networks			
11, 15, 16	Red tape & overseas trips			
12, 14, 17 Follow on actions 1 – 10 above	Help top mgt to value our work			
13	Invite top mgt to research report meetings			

Due to time constraints, Selection 2: *I wish rainbows could glow at night*, could not be developed. (NOTE: *I still dream of playing with it one some day. It is an example of a really intriguing springboard, that came from a very quiet, serious scientist! – Truida*)

EXAMPLE 2 GARDEN EXCURSION, WITH STEP 6 “HOW TO MOVE FORWARD”, AND EXAMPLE EXCURSION

This session was done with the call centre of a large organisation, where the group needed to be re-energised, and feel more valued in their organisation

Step 1. Task headline:

How to promote more open communication within the team, and in all directions.

Step 3 Springboards

Using both the Garden Excursion and the Picture Excursion, 28 springboards were listed

Step 4. Selection

A, Springboard 16: I wish our department was like a bottle of spring water – full of clarity

B. Springboard 11: I wish, like the small hole in the leaf, problems could heal themselves

Step 5a Metaphor of Selection A

The metaphor “spring water” was unpacked.

Words / Phrases associated with “spring water”

Health	Life	<i>Fresh</i>	Sparkling
Faeces	<i>Thirst</i>	<i>Tasty</i>	Crisp
Quench	<i>Cold</i>	<i>Clear</i>	<i>Natural</i>
Sound	Waterfall	Enjoyable	<i>Flow</i>

Step 5b Suggested links to task – towards an Emerging idea

1. We need to *thirst* for *clear* communication
2. Information should *flow* like a *fountain*
3. Info should run in all directions - *flow*
4. Info should be *fresh*, current
5. There should not be mountains to stop the *flow* of information
6. Communication must be *natural*
7. Information should not be *cold*
8. Make information should be *tasty*, interesting, in good *taste*
9. We should *quench* viewers’ *thirst* for information

Step 5 c The Way Forward

“I want to ensure that information is clear and fresh and runs in all directions without obstacles.”

The task owner felt she needed some help from the group for practical ideas to further expand on the concept of how to achieve “fresh, clear information “

Example Excursion Relating to Communication

Examples of communication in Political Parties	Examples of communication Among Children
Billboards	Lie
TV	Play
Parliament	Cry
Lie	Fight
<i>Media</i>	Stories

<i>Press</i>	Animate
Ballot paper	<i>Express</i>
House to house	Act
<i>Campaigns</i>	<i>Probing</i>
Groceries	Tantrum
Kiss	<i>Attention</i>
Walk in the mud	Mischief
Parties	Sign language
<i>Social gatherings</i>	Manipulate
Rallies	Gang up
<i>Empty promises</i>	Imitate

Step 6. How to move ahead – Ways and means to achieve fresh, clear information

1. *Express* our views and be specific about what we expect
2. Become more *probing* to get current information
3. Advertise ourselves *using the media*
4. Have more *social gatherings to campaign* and get *attention* of Corporate Communication, *media* and the public.
5. Negotiate specific deliverables with specific dates to avoid *empty promises*
6. Don't dwell on *empty promises* as they only hold us back.

Step 7. Emerging idea

We plan to advertise ourselves internally by using the internal newspaper and physically be more probing by knocking on other people's doors to make ourselves known; and to communicate our needs by negotiating specific deliverables with specific dates.

EXAMPLE 3 : USING THE IDEAS BAGS EXCURSION

This session was done for a major packaging company, bringing together key marketing and R&D people from firm ("Packaging") with the R&D people of a major client of theirs, a food manufacturer ("Food"), to explore how they could collaborate more effectively on innovation

Step 1. Task headline

How can we communicate more effectively within and between our large organisations, to promote innovation

Step 3. Springboards

A total of 41 springboards was developed, most of them benefiting from the "ideas bag" excursion. We show a few examples.

- I wish we could have colourful, silky smooth solutions to packaging
- I wish we could have a more intimate relationship (from a condom)
- I wish "Food" and "Packaging" could be "married" so they really know each other well – need not discuss needs, principles (building on previous springboard)
- I wish there was some way to ignite the relationship to be really exciting (from matches)
- I wish we didn't have too many cooks to spoil the broth (from a teaspoon)
- I wish we could colour code projects, to prioritise them
- I wish "Food" and "Packaging" could fit together perfectly like press studs

Step 4. Selection of springboards

I wish “Food” and “Packaging” could be “married” so they really know each other well

Step 5a Metaphor: Marriage – exploring associations

<i>Trust</i>	Divorce
<i>Contract</i>	<i>Arguments, but don't destroy relationship</i>
<i>Mutual benefit</i>	<i>Honeymoon, fun</i>
<i>Win-win</i>	Discipline
<i>Children, offspring</i>	Commitment
<i>Budget</i>	Working together
<i>Roles & Responsibilities</i>	3/5 marriages end in divorce – warning
<i>Shared values</i>	Nurturing
<i>Infidelity has a high price</i>	<i>Expectations – spell out</i>
<i>Hard work</i>	Keep rowing the boat
<i>Joint responsibility</i>	Long lasting
<i>Element of surprise</i>	Need some <i>time</i> apart
<i>Love and passion</i>	Don't demand reward at expense of the other

Step 5b Links – What this suggests in terms of the task

1. Agree *shared values* – protocol
2. *Legally binding contract*
3. *Discuss expectations*
4. Decide how conflicts are going to be resolved
5. Agree on continuous *hard work (Roles & Responsibilities)*. *Joint responsibility*
6. *Love and passion – have fun*
7. Have mutual *respect and trust*
8. Make *time* for one another
9. Understand, and quantify, *mutual benefit*
10. *Every argument is not the end of a marriage*

Step 7. Emerging idea

I plan to take the “marriage” forward as a team effort, including all of the above concepts (1. to 10.)

EXAMPLE 4 MAGAZINE EXCURSION – a variant of the Picture Excursion, but we give each participant a magazine with big bold pictures, e.g. airline magazines

Workshop with staff of the regional office of an NGO working in the field of adult literacy.

Step 1 Task Headline

How can we put together a marketing plan for our regional office

Step 3. Springboards

We listed 36 springboards. A few examples appear below.

- I wish we could use the butterfly lifecycle as a metaphor for literacy
- I wish Prolit's name can be on packaging of condoms that are given to people

- I wish we could get a page in a magazine which is written in the language of the magazine, but upside-down and backwards – to make people understand illiteracy
- I wish Prolit can make the green pastures created by literacy visible

Step 4. Selection

The group selected “I wish we could use the butterfly lifecycle as a metaphor for literacy”.

Step 5a Metaphor

We first looked for associations with the metaphor: *Butterflies*

<i>Beauty</i>	Energy	Freedom
<i>Spring</i>	New start	Growth
Hope	<i>Flexible</i>	All directions
Completing stages of <i>metamorphosis</i>		<i>Final stage = mature</i>
Out-thinking, emerging	Flowers	Pollinators
Sex	<i>Cross-pollination</i>	<i>Flying around</i>
Facilitation	<i>New life</i>	

Step 5b Linking back to the task – Suggested actions

1. Prolit staff need to see and sell the *beauty* of a literacy breakthrough
2. Emphasise the *flexibility* of Prolit’s material – different curricula
3. Sell *attractiveness* of Prolit’s material
4. Use Prolit’s *maturity* and track record as a strength
5. We need to *fly around* and spread the word
6. Tell clients, “As your staff become literate, you can breathe *new life* into your company”
7. Create *new off-springs* out of what we are doing now
8. Emphasise *cross-cultural richness* of our material
9. Sell adaptability to client’s needs
10. Complete phases of *metamorphosis* by breaking through from illiteracy to literacy on various levels

Step 7. Emerging idea

I plan for us to:

- Fly around, and spread the word (No. 5) and
- Prolit staff need to see and sell the beauty of a literacy break-through (No. 1, 10), and the value of our services to individuals and to client firms (No. 2, 3, 6, 8, 9)

EXAMPLE 5 USING LINE DRAWING EXCURSION

With the management team of a statutory board regulating an industry – which had recently changed from a being part of a Government department, to becoming autonomous

Step 1. Task headline

How to ensure that external stakeholders, including the public, are accurately informed regarding the responsibilities and functional parameters of the Board

Step 3. Springboards

In all, 23 springboards were developed. We show a few of the springboards that emerged after the line drawing excursion.

- I wish we could be perceived as being as colourful as this picture
- I wish people wouldn't read things into something – that isn't there
- I wish we could be seen as one of the jewels in the crown of the Provincial Administration
- I wish the arrow pointed up, not down
- I wish people would start to see the upside and not just downside

Step 4. Selection

The group selected the springboard “I wish we could be seen as one of the jewels in the crown of the Provincial Administration” for further development.

Step 5a Building on the metaphor

Associations around “Crown Jewels”

Royalty	<i>Protection</i>	Potential
Opulence	<i>Wealth</i>	Inaccessibility
Exclusivity	Irreplaceable	Power
Expensive	Lineage	<i>Uniqueness</i>
<i>History</i>	Beauty	<i>Sovereignty</i>
Vanity	Tradition	<i>Pride</i>
Status	<i>Value</i>	<i>Respect</i>
Jeweller	Creator	

Step 5b Suggestions from the metaphor – Linking back to the task

1. Take and express *pride* in the work we do
2. Spell out *value* to community
3. Emphasise *protection* of the public
4. Focus on our industry as generator of *wealth*
5. Recognise the *value* of our services
6. Earn the *respect* of the community
7. Point to the Board's outstanding *history, track record*
8. Explain the *uniqueness* of the environment relevant to stakeholders
9. Explain our *sovereignty* as regulators
10. Be the creator of our own destiny

Step 7. Emerging idea

I plan to properly communicate to stakeholders the role, value, uniqueness, and track record of the Board as an autonomous regulator of a vibrant industry.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE STEPS IN THE OVERALL PROCESS

Often traditional brain-storming is fun, but the results are not as exciting as the ideas. However, with this process, task owners or “clients” are guided to ensure that promising ideas, that can make a difference, are turned into action plans, with responsibilities and deadlines agreed. Practical actions suggested in the Idea Development phase, (and often also in Idea Generation) give task-owners a range of actions from which they can choose, to draft an action plan. This ensures a move forward from mere creativity, to ensure implementation of innovative solutions – such as new products or services, doing things significantly differently, or improved processes and systems – that lead to big returns on the time or money invested.

The process consists of two distinct main phases separated by idea selection.

The phases are

- Idea Generation – during which *excursions* are most frequently used to ensure a rich variety of ideas, novel thinking and to “catapult” participants out of the box or out of the “hole”. Here the thinking is unfocussed and the language used is “wishing”. (Steps 1 to 3)
- Selection of Ideas – during which ideas are selected based on *intrigue*, a metaphor or something that cannot literally be done (for example “I wish I can be a fly on the wall”) which is intriguing, and contains a metaphor “fly”, and which cannot literally be used as a solution to a problem as is. (Step 4)
- Idea Development – where *metaphors* are used to help “unpack” the selected intriguing idea to add variety and newness to the one idea. Here the creative thinking becomes more focused on one topic, and the language becomes more action and solution oriented. (Steps 5 to 9)

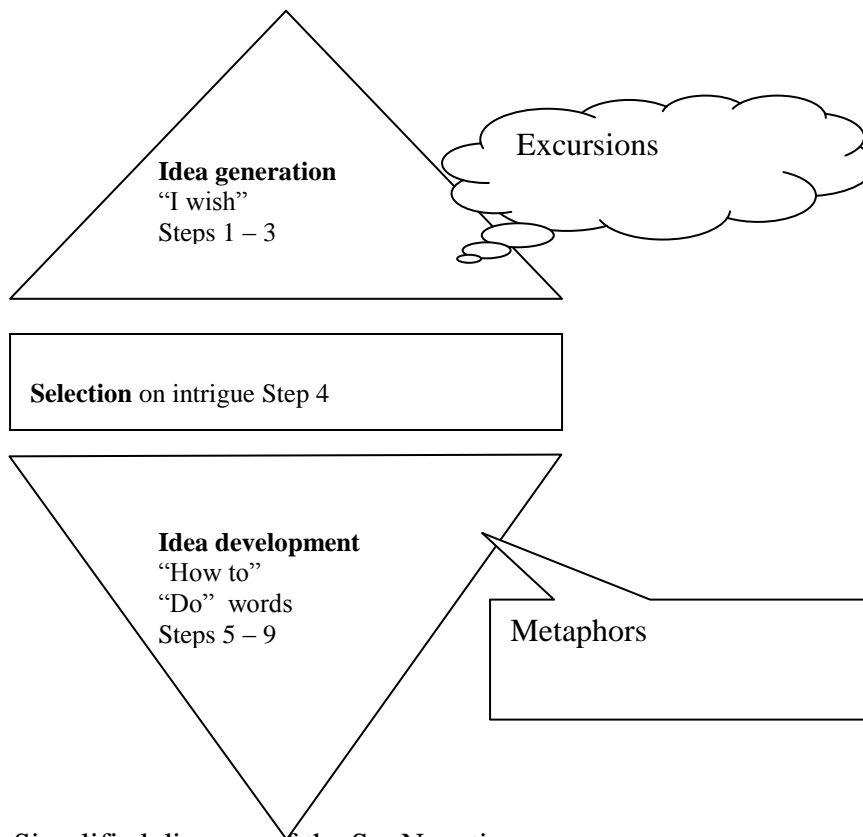


Figure 1. Simplified diagram of the SynNovation process

Idea Generation phase, or “top half” of process

Steps 1. & 2. – Task statement and Analysis. The task-owner states the task to be worked on in a *task headline* phrasing it as “*How can I / we...*” or “*I wish I...*”, and gives a *brief task analysis*, prompted through five key questions by the facilitator. Participants or resources get just enough information to get the gist of the task in order to offer ideas. They “listen for ideas” as the task is being stated.

Step 3. *Idea generation* – All participants, including the task owner, suggest *Springboards*, or beginning ideas for possible solutions, stated in short “I wish...” headline statements, with some background. All headlines are recorded in participants’ exact words, and there is no evaluation of ideas. Participants are encouraged to come up with really crazy, way-out ideas, and *excursions* are used to generate more novel, speculative springboards – and to add to the fun! As can be seen from the examples, anything goes – even if illegal, naughty, irrational or improper!

Idea Selection

Step 4. *Selection* – The task-owner selects one or more springboards to develop. Selection is NOT based on feasibility but rather on *intrigue* and fascination (“Where might this lead?”), or something that cannot be literally done, for example “I wish I could be a fly on the wall”. This allows one to explore the most creative ideas that will produce valuable break-throughs if one can find a way to make them work. Selecting on feasibility, as often happens in typical brainstorming sessions, evaluates ideas for feasibility too soon. If an idea is immediately feasible, it is unlikely to be new. When feasibility is the selection criterion, it comes at the expense of newness. Any feasible springboards worth doing can simply be implemented – without help from the group to make the idea doable.

Some promising ideas are almost doable, probably with some help – then we call them *interesting*, and go straight to Step 7, *Emerging Idea*. But the really intriguing ideas are so different that one cannot do them literally, and the task-owner does not know where to start. That is when we need to unlock the metaphor to help to make it doable. Thus in this paper we will focus on *intriguing ideas*.

Idea Development phase, or “bottom half” of process

Comprises steps 5 to 9. The group helps the task owner to take a “crazy”, non-doable idea to a stage where the intriguing idea starts to look feasible. This is done by exploring the magic in the idea and overcoming concerns. The benefit of the group having worked with the task-owner to develop and refine the selected idea/s is that they also have ownership of the new solutions, resulting in enthusiastic implementation of action plans.

Step 5. *Building the metaphor – the most exciting part of Idea Development*. (a) Starting from an intriguing springboard – something that cannot be done literally, and contains a metaphor such as “I wish we could turn Africa upside down” (see Example 1) – the client and group forget the task and develop the metaphor in the chosen springboard by listing any words, feelings and associations triggered by the metaphor. All words are captured on the flip chart. (b) The task owner and group then look at the words listed to explore the metaphor and suggest ways in which to link the word associations back to the task. These ideas – more practical than the springboards and often starting with a verb – are also captured on the flip chart. (c) Now the task owner, possibly helped by the group, makes connections between the “what it suggests” ideas and the task we are addressing. If any one or a combination of these ideas are useful enough that the client can say “I plan to....”, the

group can usually move on to Step 7., *Emerging Idea*. If, however, the client feels s/he still needs some help to make the ideas more practical, the client needs to identify what sort of ideas s/he wants from the group to develop this beginning direction. This “where is help needed” statement is captured on the flip chart, and we move to Step 6.(see Example 2).

Step 6. *How to move ahead*, or developing “ways and means” – The group now generates 8 to 12 specific and actionable ideas in response to the “need” statement. These ideas are no longer “I wish” or “How to” – they must start with verbs or “action words”. The headlines are also captured on the flip chart.

Step 7. *Emerging idea or Concept* – Once 8 to 12 ideas have emerged either from step 5(b), or step 6, ask the client/s if they are at a stage where they can say “I plan to...” They then pull together from one or more of those ideas an emerging idea, stating it in their own words, and giving a brief description of how they might go about it.

Step 8. *Constructive evaluation* – The client and resources first look at the positive aspects and potential benefits of the concept, and list these. Then the client only identifies the main concerns, obstacles or areas that still need development – stating them in “How can I / How can we / How to...”. Take the concerns one-by-one, in order of priority, and the whole group helps to generate practical, action-oriented ideas to overcome concerns, and so further develop the concept into a possible solution.

Step 9. *Possible solution/s and action plan* – If the client wishes, the group may return to other selected springboards, and take these through idea development (steps 7. and 8., or steps 5. to 8.) to get further “possible solutions”. Once all major concerns regarding one or more concepts have been addressed, the output of the session is written up as one or more possible solutions. Finally, from the range of possible solutions that have been developed, consolidate or select the most promising, and write up the final solution. Identify the next steps and write them on the flip chart as an action plan in which tasks, responsibilities and deadlines have been agreed.

Conclusion

We trust these examples gave you an idea of the potential and fun of both excursions and metaphors, in developing unusual ideas up to solution stage. A psychiatrist and Jungian therapist who recently attended the two-day SynNovation Workshop in Innovation and Team Skills (WITS!) where people learn the process experientially, made an interesting comment. “We as therapists battle for weeks, months or years to help people to tap into their subconscious minds. You got us all to do it within a few hours.” We largely credit the power of excursions and metaphors for this – and for the enthusiasm participants usually have to implement action plans developed in this way.

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