

Unlocking creativity despite participant constraints

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I would like to share with you some experiences we have had, and approaches we have used, in facilitating creativity sessions despite constraints in the composition of the participant groups – whether these were working with multi-language groups, included a sight-impaired participant, or working with people with limited educational levels. Another constraint could also be working with high levels of hostility in a group, which one could find after a merger, or in workgroups where diversity could be an issue or a barrier (for example culture, race, different levels in the organisation, or different functions).

The main trigger to this story is that recently, we had a very enriching experience when we had to facilitate a two-day workshop for 14 people from a Call Centre – with one participant who is blind.

Some background: “We” are Lu-Marié Sobey and Truida Prekel, working in South Africa with a group of associates we have trained, using the SynNovation approach, which we have developed, largely based on the main principles of synectics. (We distinguish between *Synecticsworld* – the international company – and *synectics*, referring to the process and the widely recognised body of knowledge.) In the past 10 years, we have used the approach in a wide range of applications in business, government, non-governmental organisations, education and communities, and found it very useful in helping to address in creative ways the many challenges of diversity, development and building a sense of sharing and trust – much needed in South Africa even 11 years after the political change.

While diversity can be a major strength in most creativity and innovation initiatives – providing opportunities for different perspectives, novelty and cross-fertilisation – there are also situations when diversity could be a barrier, if it leads misunderstanding and lack of trust, feelings of disempowerment, or even hostility. However, generally the synectics approach can help to turn even such diversity into an asset, rather than a liability. In fact, the word synectics means 'the bringing together of diverse forces'

An important element in this process is using “excursions” to stimulate way-out ideas and increase the fun in the idea generation phase. One of the ways we could involve participants with “constraints” more effectively was by using excursions that draw on different senses and do not rely heavily on sight or language understanding – depending on the relevant participant constraints.

The aspects we will cover in this chapter are

- Working with sight-impaired participants
- Overcoming language barriers
- Working with people with limited education
- Overcoming relationship barriers and building trust.

Working with sight-impaired participants

When we were told that we would have a blind participant in a two-day workshop, we wanted to ensure that he would be able to participate as actively as possible. So we did some thinking and planning beforehand and picked a few friends' brains. We e-mailed our four synectics mentors for suggestions: George Prince (co-founder of Synectics), Vincent Nolan (who took Synectics to the UK and Europe), Jasmine Dale (who originally trained us) and Christine Hurst (a more recent associate now living in South Africa). We were very grateful to have responses from three of them within 24 hours! Although none of them had had blind participants, all made useful suggestions. I quote from some of these responses.

From Christine Hurst

Regarding the visually impaired, I have never (knowingly) worked with anyone with this problem. I think the ideas that you have suggested are great, I agree with the thought of appealing to the other four senses. In fact, that makes me think that maybe we don't do enough of this with other groups. Anyway, here are my initial thoughts

- You say you could not blindfold people – you could simply ask people to close their eyes?
- The Imaging excursion will be very powerful here.
- If they work in a call centre it's likely that they use computers in some way. It might help to find out about how they work.
- Building on that thought – if they touch type for work – how about having a laptop linked to an OHP for them to scribe whilst you are facilitating?
- How to use small tape recorders for an excursion – what I'm thinking is that you could send people out to listen for triggers from an area by recording it and playing it back to the group for them to springboard from. (The group won't know where the sound came from, so would be "guessing".)
- You don't say what the subject of the session is but if it's about call centre / customer service type of thing, the last point could be used in some way to emphasise the importance of listening skills and interpretation, etc. Not sure where I'm going with this but I think it could be developed into something quite powerful in this context.

From Vincent Nolan

I've not encountered this one, so I have no experience to share. Closest I have been is a lady who could not see red writing on the flip chart, so I discarded the red pen!

Only idea I have is, use a laptop and projector instead of (or as well as) the flip chart and print the notes after each session (in Braille, possibly).

As for excursions, only the imaging excursion is explicitly visual and who knows what visual images blind persons may have in their heads? Example, personal analogy, essential paradox / book title, and career excursions could all work. Great opportunity to invent some new excursions, tactile, auditory, aromatic, kinaesthetic – I'd love to hear about them after the event. What does it matter, as long as they forget the problem and have some fun!

I like your emphasis on other senses for 'visioning' – I have never been a good visualiser and I still remember George Prince's advice to me when we first did an imaging excursion: "Just fake it", i.e. imagine using other senses.

From George Prince

Sounds like you have done just about everything necessary. One thought is to make sure the facilitator says out loud what he or she is recording. Also, when selections are being made, talk the list.

Picking other brains

We also talked to other friends, and got various ideas and suggestions. One was to borrow, and use a most unusual CD for an excursion – a CD by an avant-garde Swiss composer, Fritz Hauser, titled *Fantasia Zoologica*, in which he made tape recordings of sounds in the Basle Zoo, and combined these into a composition. We also considered making up a collection of different fragrances and aromas, in closed containers, and seeing what thoughts and memories these would trigger if released when the participants are blindfolded – but that one remains to be used later.

I would like to share how this event worked out, and some things that were helpful – as we believe the way in which synectics and SynNovation tap into various senses make them a very valuable way to involve visually impaired people in creative problem-solving and planning, in a team context.

1. **Preparation and interviews:** We spent extra time with the young man – let's call him John – when we did individual interviews with all participants before the workshop, and explained

key aspects of the process and ground rules to him. We took along two wooden block triangles to help him to visualise the “diamond” that represents the process (top half = Idea Generation, bottom half = Idea Development, with Selection in-between). We also checked out with him some of the things we had in mind, to make sure they would be acceptable to him, and asked him to name a colleague who could help him when needed.

2. **Groundrules:** When we introduced the process to the group – using PowerPoint – we verbally described the diagrams such as the process, the climate diagram and ground rule sketches as we talked them through – to help John to visualise these.
3. **Visioning:** We did a vision exercise for the whole call centre team in three parts.
 - a) First, people walked in pairs through the garden, with one leading the other who kept his / her eyes closed, without telling the sightless person where they were going, and then describing the destination scene before the other could view it him/herself – to build trust, and to demonstrate how difficult it is to find your way if you do not have a vision of where you are going. (We avoided blindfolding to make it not too obvious.)
 - b) Each pair then repeated the same journey, still with one’s eyes closed, but now “knowing”, to demonstrate how much easier it is when one knows where one is going.
 - c) Then small groups had fun making cut & paste collages of their vision for the future of the call centre – with the selected helper working with John.
4. **Choice of Excursions:** (A technique used to get people “away from the problem” to generate way-out thoughts and novel ideas). We selected and thought up excursions that could tap into senses other than sight – visioning, the career excursion, and playing the “zoological” CD with a variety of sounds from a zoo. Everyone had to close their eyes and listen to the CD for associations – and came up with really rich ideas, and much laughter.
5. **We adapted two excursions:** When others did a “Pictures” excursion (giving each a handful of pictures to generate new thoughts), we asked John to visualise a special holiday he had spent and then make connections. We also gave him a special version of our “ideas bags” (filled with a variety of about 20 small objects that provide tactile, taste, fragrance, mobile, visual and sound triggers). We made sure that in his bag the objects were very tactile, and did not rely on sight for recognition. (Ideas that John had generated from these excursions were selected by the group for further development.)
6. **Reading and writing:** Whenever we were at a stage in the workshop where he needed help with reading or writing – for example selecting from springboards generated, or identifying issues to work on – Lu-Marie or I acted as his scribe, or read for him. We also tried to use numbers or words in alphabetical order, or that had some alliteration to make it easier for him to remember the items.
7. **Feeling valued:** Because people in call centres often have to deal with frustrated or angry people, and they don’t always feel valued in their firm, we did two exercises in self-esteem and giving and receiving feedback that were valuable to all – including John. As John had lost his sight in an accident and had not seen himself for many years, it was heart-warming to hear one of his colleagues describing him as handsome, and see him beam! And he enjoyed giving verbal feedback to others, helped by a scribe.
8. **Special handouts:** John has a computer that can turn text into sound for him. However, it cannot handle diagrams. So we made special versions of our hand-outs and some articles describing the process, removing all diagrams, and e-mailed these to him.

It was a rich experience for us to tap into the non-visual aspects of the process – more consciously than we usually do. John said he had never before been able to participate in a workshop to this extent, and he found it very stimulating and enjoyable. He had also learnt much of value on a personal level. He made the interesting comment that he thought it was also good for the other participants, as

they had been forced to tap into parts of their brains that they usually under-utilised. This was not rocket science – just fine-tuning the so-rich synectics approach with some more thought and planning, to achieve results that were rewarding to all of us, in many ways.

We have thought that – due to its multi-media, multi-sense qualities, the synectics / SynNovation approach could probably also be adapted to accommodate people with hearing disabilities, with special attention to scribing, possibly using an interpreter, and by also tapping into other senses. We plan to explore this idea further with associations for people with visual or hearing disabilities, as such meaningful participation could add value both to them, and to their organisations.

Overcoming language barriers

We have on several occasions had to work with people where language diversity could have been a barrier. South Africa has 11 official languages, and while English tends to be the *lingua franca* in business, that means that people often have to function in their third or fourth language – which does not help spontaneity and quick thinking! Fear of spelling errors can also be a barrier in scribing. We recently facilitated a workshop for a mining company where the participants were from Brazil, Chile, Venezuela, Ireland, Namibia and South Africa. So we had to cope with Portuguese, Spanish and English.

Some suggestions from practical experience in working with multi-language groups

- We usually use English to put across concepts, and – without talking down to people – we make a point of speaking a simple, clear (low “fog index”) language, avoiding long, “big” words, and keeping sentences short.
- We avoid using idioms and expressions that could be confusing or ambiguous.
- We might crack a joke or two, or use a word or two in other languages, just to make others feel included.
- We encourage participants who are not fluent in English to put forward their ideas in the language that comes easiest to them – because usually there is someone in the group who will be able to translate.
- If ideas have been offered and written up in both English and Afrikaans (another major language used in South Africa), the facilitators are available to translate for those who do not understand Afrikaans, when ideas have to be selected for further development.
- We are currently training a few associates who are fluent in three of the other languages, Sesotho, isiXhosa and Zulu, who will also be able to help when needed.
- Always check with your clients beforehand, and again with the audience, what their home languages are, so that you can allow extra time for sessions if you know you will have to deal with a variety of languages.
- When working with the mining group mentioned above, we made sure to speak slowly and clearly, when explaining the process, and had participants translating whenever needed. People put forward their ideas in their own languages, and then a scribe who knew all three languages translated as ideas were captured on the flip-charts.
- The mining company had all the handouts and exercises translated into Portuguese and Spanish, for use afterwards, and we have put the participants in touch with Spanish and Portuguese speaking consultants who know synectics, should they wish to use the process in their own countries.

One of the participants commented that the “language barriers” actually brought people closer to each other, as all tried to help to make the workshop work, and to understand one another.

To benefit from others’ experience regarding these types of barriers – when I was asked to write this chapter – I again e-mailed my friends and mentors. Here are a few of the responses that relate to language challenges.

Christine Hurst

In the late 1980s we in Synectics Europe, designed and ran a series of events for Hewlett Packard on the management of escalated problem sites. We ran approximately 25 as I recall, with around 30 participants at each 3-day event. The participants were a mix from UK, France, Italy, Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, Scandinavia (including Finland) and I seem to remember someone from Moscow and a smattering from other Iron Curtain (as it was then) countries. The main thing I discovered (as I ran most if not all the events with a partner) was that the French hated working in any other language, the Dutch were fantastic and invariably multi-lingual, ditto the Scandinavians, but not quite as multi-lingual as the Dutch. The East Europeans struggled the most because of their lack of exposure to English.

The final day of each event was a simulated problem site in which one group were customers and the others the PSMs. They arrived in the morning not knowing what was going to happen as we fed them the scenarios and problems as the day progressed – in order to simulate real life as closely as possible. It was a huge success.

You have also reminded me of another experience I had in the late 1990s. I had to train some Japanese to facilitate some sessions in Tokyo for Unilever. Their working language is, of course, English but they found it easier to work in Japanese so I had the services of a Japanese scribe. If anything ever did, it drove home to me just how much a facilitator does not need to be involved in (or even understand) the content. It was amazing, even in such a different culture, how I could see and hear what micro process was involved in people's inputs and responses – questions, general excitement about a train of thought, etc.

I have to say I was very nervous about the whole thing, not just the language but, in addition, the reputed inscrutability of the Japanese. I think watching the process emerge as described above put paid to that view. It is said that the Japanese say “yes” to everything for fear of causing offence – which boded well for the ground rule of “suspend judgement”. They did reject ideas – but very politely!

Vincent Nolan

You make me realise that almost all my facilitation experience has been with WASP groups – White Anglo-Saxon Protestants – a few Catholics and agnostics, maybe. Congratulations on your notes on the Blind Participant experience – it may not be rocket science, but it is very valuable to have the experience articulated and on the record for others to draw on.

So I only have some tangential thoughts to share, which may be useful to you as triggers. Fundamentally, my view of facilitation is that the facilitator is the servant of the client and group – it is a humble role, analogous to the referee in a football match, whose job is to apply the rules with discretion and otherwise let the game flow. For this reason, the facilitator must keep out of content and refrain from offering his or her own ideas (however exciting they may be). The facilitator needs to be thinking *process*, not *content*

On language, I have a basic rule, “Extra time / space for participants working in a second language”. However fluent they may seem to be, they are always likely to need a split second extra to express themselves in the second language. The facilitator does not need to understand what is being said, except to be able to act as scribe. I have facilitated a session in Finnish, with a local scribing for me.

Also, when training in Finland and elsewhere, we let the participants work in their own language and we were still able to coach the process and conduct the review from the video (in English, mostly, though the participants might switch into Finnish to discuss things among themselves. I used to say, that's fine, but if you want any input from me, someone will have to tell me what it's about!)

Working with people with limited education

In South Africa (where there is a distressingly high adult illiteracy rate) we have on occasion had to work with participants with limited education, and even illiterate people. Because the facilitator acts as scribe, so that people just have to put their ideas forward in their own words, we have had sessions where illiterate people and people with limited education were able to offer their ideas, share in the fun, and feel good when their ideas are selected. Here the Synectics way of stating ideas in the form of “headline / with limited background” makes it easier for them to speak up, as they do not need to be articulate, or make long justifications of their ideas.

However, according to a comment from Vincent Nolan, “Limited education again can be more of an asset than a liability, in my experience. We worked with a group of scientists and also with a group of motorists in a project about traffic management. One scientist attended both sessions. After the Teamwork Experiment (when the group works on a problem in any way they choose) the scientist said after the motorists session ‘that was a much better meeting than scientists’ meeting – more creative, many more ideas, enjoyable and fun’”. Too much knowledge and expertise often gets in the way of creativity. The important thing is that people are valued, listened to, and feel free to participate.

Many of the principles mentioned under “different languages” above – keeping to simple words and short sentences, allowing extra time, and using simple diagrams to demonstrate points – would also apply here.

The book *Creative Education* edited by Vincent Nolan gives interesting guidelines and case studies on stimulating creativity among learners on different levels, from pre-school to university, so this could also be useful in facilitating creativity when working with people on various educational levels.

Overcoming relationship barriers and building trust

It is essential to create a positive, supportive climate if one is to encourage people to come up with creative ideas. However, the reality is that more often than not, power games, office politics, and even real hostilities among participants can get in the way. The “positive and negative behaviours” and ground rules identified by Synectics in the late 1950s, as well as skilled facilitation, are invaluable in helping to create a collaborative climate. Also, selecting an informal venue, preferably with sleep-over facilities, and fun tools like “seat surprises” (lollypops or whatever), “reward baskets” to encourage way-out ideas, and fun ice-breakers and excursions – all help people to lighten up. (See Greatwood and Ceserani and the two books by Vincent Nolan listed in the references.)

We have found that this approach is as powerful in addressing conflict and building a spirit of collaboration, as it is in helping people to generate creative ideas and develop them into action plans. In particular after mergers, or when organisations work through change, and even in cases where affirmative action had been handled very unwisely – a well-planned facilitated intervention using the synectics principles and groundrules have helped people to discover both new ways to behave and to work together– and to develop creative action plans that will help them to be more successful in future. We have often had feedback that there has been a lasting improvement in relationships, long after the intervention.

In such cases, we always ensure that

- the group for any intervention is composed carefully to include all key players who will need to help implement plans that may be developed
- one or more of the facilitators conducts confidential individual interviews of 30 to 45 minutes with everyone who will attend, both to get their views and perspectives, and to help to get their buy-in to the intervention
- if there are people who we believe may have special issues, we try to schedule their interviews before lunch or at the end of the day, so that, unobtrusively, we can have enough time to

listen to them. Participants have often said that the interview was “therapeutic”, because people so seldom really listened to them

- the top managers of any group understand what we intend achieving – because if they fear loss of power as people are empowered and re-energised by new thinking and positive behaviours, this could be counter-productive, or could even increase levels of frustration.

Three sources that may be useful in this regard are Vincent Nolan’s chapter on “Creativity: the antidote to the Argument Culture”, George Prince’s paper “How the Emotional Field (Climate) Impacts Performance”, and a case study by Michael Hicks about the synectics approach to “multiple task ownership”, in his book on problem-solving. (See references below.)

Conclusion

Luckily, good facilitators of creativity are always tuned in to the needs of participants in sessions that they conduct (as Vincent Nolan said, they are “the servant of the client and the group”). Another synector, John Alexander said “My immediate thoughts go to motivations. You can take a horse to water, but not make it drink. Therefore to help people unlock their natural abilities you need to, as a facilitator, figure out what motivates them. What is in it for them to put their ideas out there. It is fairly straight forward to create a safe environment in the group, but how to create a safe environment in a participant’s head is another matter.” So this is something which we will all keep trying to achieve.

At the same time, we are also creative, so we are able and likely to enjoy thinking up, and experimenting with, new ways to enable and encourage all participants to have fun with ideas – despite possible barriers, be they disabilities, languages, education, cultures or interpersonal factors.

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