**Teacher Notes: 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 (University of New South Wales, 2016). It provides a free and open environment that encourages everyone to participate in group sharing of ideas. Brainstorming encourages people to come up with thoughts and ideas that can be reflect knowledge, experience, beliefs, attitude and what is shared may seem anywhere on the continuum from rational to unusual. Quirky ideas are welcomed and built upon, and all participants are encouraged to contribute fully, helping them develop a rich array of shared responses to a question. Sometimes these ideas can be crafted into original, creative solutions to a problem, while other ideas might be stepping-stones that can spark more ideas.

**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 and access prior knowledge
* 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.
* put knowledge control in student hands so that students take ownership of learning.
* provide an opportunity for students to share ideas and expand their existing knowledge by building on each other's contributions.

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

**Active listening** is a structured form of listening and responding that focuses the attention on the speaker. The teacher can model this approach to other students by listening to the speaker fully, and then repeating, in the listener’s own words, what he or she thinks the speaker has said. The teacher does not have to agree with the speaker--he or she must simply state what they think the speaker said. This demonstrates that the teacher is actively listening to really understand what the speaker has said. If the teacher did not fully understand, the speaker can explain some more.

Active listening has several benefits. First, it forces people to listen attentively to others. Second, it avoids misunderstandings, as people have to confirm that they do really understand what another person has said. Third, it tends to open people up, to get them to say more (Conflict Research Consortium, 1998)

**How to brainstorm**

1. First, set up a comfortable environment for the session. Make sure that the room is well-lit and that you have the tools and resources that you need.
2. The teacher may begin a brainstorming session by posing a question or a problem, or by introducing a topic. Clearly define what students need to explore or answer. Make it clear that that the meeting's objective is to generate ideas and share what we already know.
3. Set up the rules for the session. They should include:
   1. letting the leader (group or classroom) have control
   2. allowing everyone to contribute
   3. suspending evaluation of ideas until all ideas are gathered
   4. the validity of all contributions
   5. recording each answer, unless it is a repeat
   6. setting a time limit and stopping when that time is up.
4. In groups, students then express possible answers, relevant words and ideas to their own shared working space. This could on be a piece of butchers paper, a piece of laminated A3 paper or on an object. Give students plenty of working time at the start of the session to write down as many of their own ideas as they can in their groups.
5. A) Then, ask them to share their ideas, while giving everyone a fair opportunity to contribute. Contributions should be accepted without criticism or judgement and should be summarised on a whiteboard by the teacher or a scribe as the ideas are called out. Judgment and analysis at this stage stunts idea generation and limits sharing. In this way brainstorming’s approach helps to get some people ‘unstuck’ when getting their ideas out to the shared collaborative space.

(As the group facilitator, you should share ideas if you have them, but spend your time and energy supporting your team and guiding the discussion. Stick to one conversation at a time, and refocus the group if people become side-tracked.)   
B) Alternatively, students can bring their ideas at this stage on their shared space to a central place in the classroom. Representatives from each group can then share their ideas with the class. In this way, knowledge control is in student hands, rather than in the teacher’s hands and students have greater ownership of their own ideas.

1. These ideas are then examined, usually in an open class discussion. Evaluate ideas at the end of the session – this is the time to explore ideas further.

**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.

**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.