

# Expanding Forms of Collaboration

Strategies for Increasing Equity of Voice in Design Offices

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## An Opportunity for Change

The most widely adopted process for generating creative ideas within organizations is brainstorming (Sutton & Hargadon, 1996). This approach to group collaboration is the standard process utilized in my own company. Research shows that there are significant limitations associated with brainstorming. Primarily, brainstorming collaboration is often dominated by only a few participants leaving multiple voices unheard and leaving multiple ideas unrevealed. Collaboration in a design office needs to maximize innovation and creativity through a variety of ideas. This requires expanding our current understanding of collaboration through a set of new tools and strategies that maximize equity of voice.

## The Process

My methodology will look at six tools in more detail over the course of a three-month period for reporting as this phase 1 preliminary study. I believe this study will show that new tools of collaboration are needed across my company and that staff will be excited about the new process. The phase 2 study will expand the preliminary research and extend the schedule of analysis for another three to six months. Phase 3, will include a roll out of the collaboration tools across the firm and will include training of key facilitators in each office through our legacy design process. The two primary models of study for this research will be brainstorming, or group think, and brainwriting, individual design expression in a group setting. Traditional models of each option will be studied as tools for collaboration through structured and unstructured brainstorming and brainwriting. Rolestorming, SIL (successive integration of problem elements) and picture stimulation are additional tools of collaboration that will be studied. Each are variations of the brainstorming and brainwriting models and each can be adapted to either model.

## Observations

"I personally found this process to be very refreshing. I find that most design reviews are dominated by a few people centering the conversation on more technical and small aspects of the design. I think that design reviews should be better about creating a space for all people to give their perspective on the design. By giving everyone a role in the beginning, I found this design review to be more guided, engaging and productive. I think this process holds a lot of opportunity elevate our design and create a sense of investment in the process. I hope this helps. Good luck!" This quote is from a Chicago Office colleague. Even though she expressed this following the cross-office photo simulation design review, her comments clearly articulate challenges with standard brainstorming and the opportunities that exist by expanding tools of collaboration in the firm. Qualitative analysis over the past three months, have shown that brainwriting strategies have result in more ideas generated, a much stronger equity of voice, and an increased sense of culture through dialogue - meaning staff are able to be part of the design discussion, which is key to their growth and happiness in an organization.

Overall, the brainwriting tools received very positive feedback from staff participating. In this remote environment, brainstorming appears to be at a significant disadvantage due to the difficulties with virtual communication. Brainstorming did not result in additional design ideas or an equity of voices. Brainwriting showed a much stronger connection to staff during the collaboration process. In the brainwriting sessions, all staff had time to speak and articulate ideas. Brainstorming did not show a strong connection with staff. In brainstorming sessions, most of the collaborators did not participate in the discussion. This shows significant issues with equity of voice. In most cases, at least half of all participants do not show their screens during the session, so it is essentially a conference call. This is another disadvantage for brainstorming, because it makes it easier for participants to not be vocal or engaged in the session. Brainwriting generally forces all participants to engage and participate.

- **Group Size Matters. Limit groups to five or six to maximize collaboration**
- **Brainstorming is more difficult while working remotely**
- **Photo Stimulation and Rolestorming are most effective tools**
- **Brainwriting produces more ideas than brainstorming**
- **Facilitator is vital**

## Literature Cited

1. Heslin, Peter A. "Better than brainstorming? Potential contextual boundary conditions to brainwriting for idea generation in organizations." *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 82.1 (2009): 129-145.

2. VanGundy, Arthur B. *Creative problem solving: A guide for trainers and management*. ABC-CLIO, 1987.



## Tools of Collaboration

### 1. Unstructured Brainstorming

The standard process of collaboration at the firm and in the field is through unstructured brainstorming. This type of collaboration does not follow a set list of rules.

Methodology:

1. Assemble as a group of five to twelve. This is also used very often in smaller impromptu collaborations.
2. Clearly articulate the purpose and frame of the collaboration session.
3. Present project context and project challenges. Clearly define the frame of the discussion relevant to the project challenges (i.e. we are not looking for completely out of the box ideas, we want specific solutions relevant to key project challenges).
4. Discussion is opened for team to provide comment and critical feedback on the project context and to provide potential solutions to identified problems.

### 3. The SIL Method

The SIL method according to Vangundy, gives participants a chance to iterate each other's ideas.

Methodology:

1. Project leader to assemble design review team prior to the design session.
2. Present project context within a brief 10 to 15-minute conversation. Answer any specific questions. Limit the conversation.
3. Assemble group for formal 1-hour design session.
4. Ask everyone to prepare design solutions and ideas. Individuals silently generate ideas for 10 to 15 minutes.
5. Two group members select one idea each and read it aloud.
6. The other group members verbally think of ways to combine these two ideas into one idea and to expand the ideas.
7. The process of reading and integrating ideas continues for up to 10 to 15 minutes until and then the process repeats with two additional ideas.

### 5. Rolestorming

The rolestorming strategy encourages participants to think about the problems of a project from a specific viewpoint.

Methodology:

1. Participants need to be determined prior to design session. Each participant needs to be given character. Participants need to spend at least 30 minutes considering and researching their character prior to design sessions.
2. Assemble as a group of five to twelve. The smaller the group the better.
3. Present project context and project challenges.
4. Allow the team to take 15-20 minutes on their own to develop two or three ideas as a response to the project challenge through the perspective of their character.
5. Reconvene the team and have each collaborator present their thoughts.
6. If time allows initiate group discussion regarding ideas.
7. If time allows initiate group discussion regarding ideas.

### 2. Brainwriting for Landscape Architecture

The process of brainwriting gives everyone a voice in the creative process and subsequent discussions

Methodology:

1. If possible, send project problem statement to collaborators prior to the session.
2. Assemble as a group of five to twelve. The smaller the group the better.
3. Clearly articulate the purpose and frame of the collaboration session.
4. Present project context and project challenges.
5. Allow the team to take 15-20 minutes on their own to develop two or three ideas as a response to the project challenge(s).
6. Reconvene the team and have each collaborator present their thoughts.
7. If time allows initiate group discussion regarding ideas.

### 4. Structured Brainstorming

Structured brainstorming generally should follow a set list of rules that focuses the conversation on divergent thinking and open ideation. Following the principles set forth by Osborn, the session should be structured to elicit many ideas and should avoid critical discourse of individual ideas.

Methodology:

1. Assemble as a group of five to twelve.
2. Clearly articulate the purpose and frame of the collaboration session.
3. Present project context and project challenges. The overall frame of the discussion can remain vague to elicit ideas that are more diverse and outside of the critical question framework.
4. Discussion is opened for team to provide comment and critical feedback on the project context and to provide potential solutions to identified problems.

### 6. Picture Stimulation

The idea is to stimulate the generation of ideas through imagery.

Methodology:

1. Project leader to assemble imagery prior to the design session.
2. Take 10 minutes for each staff member to review their imagery individually.
3. Have each participant provide three ideas based on the image to the group.
4. Following the design descriptors, present the project context and challenges.
5. Each participant then silently generates ideas for 10 to 15 minutes based on the content of their images.