

# Creativity Workshops

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## WHAT IS IT?

Creativity workshops give you the opportunity to bring together individuals from across a team or organisation, to focus on and tackle a problem or new concept. The workshop provides a space for creating and inventing ideas early on in the requirements process.

## WHY DO YOU NEED IT?

There are several reasons for running creativity workshops:

- Create focus especially if attendees are freed of their day-to-day activities to put their energy into workshop.
- Roles that have valuable inputs, but which rarely spend much time interacting with each other can collaborate with expert knowledge to generate some ideas synergistically.
- The collaboration and time spent tends to make the attendees more interested in continuation work and outcomes. They are invested. This buy-in is great at championing ideas, features and products.

## WHEN DO YOU NEED IT?

As with many UX processes, creativity workshops trend to happen early on in the design process but then again on an ad hoc basis through the product development as new problems arise or new features are added.

## HOW DO YOU DO IT?

### 1. Preparation

#### Goals

Why are you having the workshop? Do you understand the problem you are trying to solve? Do you know what you want to get out of the session: will ideas suffice, or do you want complete screen journeys?

#### Planning Activities

How will the workshop be run? How much time do you have? Workshops don't tend to be longer than a couple of days and are more commonly only a morning or afternoon.

If you have a group of individuals that may be new to each other, or have not previously collaborated, you will probably want to consider a fun/ice-breaking activity first.

Depending on the goals of your workshop you will want to allow time for the different stages of creativity from the divergence through to the convergence of ideas and rating design options before refinement (and possibly screen mock-ups).

#### Attendees

Don't invite the world, only 6-8 colleagues who genuinely have something to contribute, e.g. product/proposition, marketing, support, sales, analysis, design and development. Consider a couple of smaller groups, rather than one big group. Not only does a big group become difficult to facilitate, gathering them all for the same period of time can be difficult. Don't forget, some participants may only be needed to introduce the problem or provide the vision or customer viewpoint. In this case only invite them for a portion of the workshop. Try to avoid call-in participation, aside from the technology usually failing you, it slows things down and loss of engagement is often the consequence.

In terms of running the workshop, it's always good to have some support. At least one other facilitator/supporting role will be ideal for note taking, sticking things up on the wall, invigorating attendees with a creative block, etc.

## Agenda

Not only is an agenda good to ensure you cover your goals, it also helps manage expectations on the participant side (don't forget to include breaks). I find it useful to add in times too, not just the duration of an activity, but when will it begin/end – to help you stick to the plan and speed up if necessary. It's a wise move to ensure the really important stuff is covered quite early on, not only because of fatigue, but so that if things take longer you can reduce the time on a section which does not have as much value. Send out the agenda a week ahead of the session (along with any supplementary materials).

## Location

You need room to breathe, walls to stick things up on, screens and windows for natural daylight. If you can schedule the session out of the office that's even better as you know that participants cannot run back to their desks to check their emails or finish off something they've been working on prior to the workshop.

## Materials

If you need print-outs or are using reading material, ensure that sufficient copies are printed ahead of the session. Similarly if you need the attendees to prepare anything, or want them to come to the workshop engaged, be sure to send these out 2-3 days ahead of the session.

For the workshop itself, ensure you have plenty of markers (plus pencils and pens), sticky notes, sticky tape, large sheets of paper, blu-tac etc.

## **2. Running the Workshop**

Get into the workshop early and if you're using any technology, test it, make sure it's running as expected.

### Workshop Opening

Don't spend too long; just introduce yourself and any supporting team members, then outline the day's events and the anticipated outcomes.

Next, depending on the familiarity of the group, ask each attendee to introduce themselves and their role. You may also want to use a simple ice-breaker activity, this could be anything from a prepared questionnaire (each attendee completes and then needs to find others in the group who have responded with the same answer), building games, e.g. build the tallest tower with newspapers and tape or a one-handed paper airplane; to a game of charades or *Pictionary* – anything that will get the attendees relaxed and less self-conscious.

### Running the Workshop

There are many ways of running a creativity workshop, check online for different approaches and also books like *Gamestorming*. Here are a few techniques to whet your appetite.

#### **Brainstorming Ideas with de Bono's Six Thinking Hats (approx. 1 hour)**

Six Thinking Hats is a simple, effective parallel thinking process that helps people be more productive, focused, and mindfully involved. Each thinking role is identified with a coloured symbolic *thinking hat* which by mentally wearing and switching can easily focus or redirect thoughts.

- *White hat* – Neutral/detached/independent, what are the facts? What does the data say?
- *Black hat* – Negative judgement. Critical analysis: what's not working? What's wrong?
- *Red hat* – Emotional: how do you feel? Share fears, likes, dislikes, loves and hates. What's the gut reaction?
- *Yellow hat* – Positive judgement. Hope and optimism. What's working? What do we like/want to keep?
- *Green hat* – Creativity; the possibilities, alternatives and new ideas. Opportunity to express new concepts.
- *Blue hat* – Manage the thinking process. The control mechanism: agenda setting, next steps, summarising.

All thinking styles are valid, but we naturally have a tendency to wear particular hats more than others. When brainstorming ideas, all participants wear the same hat, you then proceed as follows:

1. **Blue Hat** (3 mins). What do we need to focus on? What are we solving for? Agree the problem statement or opportunity.  
 For this and each subsequent hat change, participants write one point per sticky note. After each hat exercise is complete, the points are all discussed and stuck to the wall. Any similar points are grouped.
2. **Red Hat** (30 seconds each). How do we feel about this at the moment? What is the first gut reaction of our situation?
3. **Yellow Hat** (5 mins). What is positive about the situation today? What is working? Looking forward what can we be optimistic about?
4. **Black Hat** (5 mins). What is negative about the situation today? What's not working? What is there to be concerned about in the future?
5. **Green Hat** (10 mins). Let's get creative. How many ideas can we generate about the solutions? Get down as many ideas as possible. In a design-focused workshop, you may want to increase this time.
6. **Red Hat** (30 seconds each). How do we honestly feel about all this? What gut reactions do we now have about our situation?
7. **Blue Hat** (3 mins). What do we need to do now? What are our next steps? How should we move forward? What do we need to do first? What help do we need?

With the last hat change, you end the session with next steps, collectively you should agree definitive next steps.

Variations of the original approach exist, for example using the method in design critiques. In this case, the blue hat represents technical feasibility and the red hat represents the (proxy) feelings of users. Print-outs of the screen design are displayed and coloured sticky notes are stuck on each page to represent the thinking hat types.

**Facilitated Analogical Reasoning** (approx. 45 minutes)

An important exploratory technique, discovering new ideas in a problem space. The premise is that you transfer the knowledge from an analogically similar domain where the solution already exists, e.g. compare trains with planes or the effect of food on the human body with petrol on a car.

1. Participants work in small groups to think of analogical ideas for the problem area.
2. To aid participants, the facilitator presents a simple example of analogical creativity between two domains to:
  - Identify how to detect and record analogical mappings between domains
  - How to use each mapping to transfer knowledge from the source domain to generate new ideas for the target domain.

**Removing Constraints** (approx. 45 minutes)

This transformational approach focuses on the fact that constraints tend to create creative blocks. The technique specifically identifies the constraints then systematically removes them ... to see what would become possible and hence generate new requirements (even if the constraint cannot really be removed, the reframing can contribute to creative idea generation).

Constraint removal options:

- **Eliminate** – removed completely
- **Diminish** – reduce the strength of the constraint
- **Interpret** – view the constraint differently

**Design the Box** (approx. 1 hour)

This is a popular approach in product development that helps organise what's the most important for users. The box provides the medium for this focus. Essentially the different sections of a box translate to what you think is most important to the user, for example whatever is on the large front face is deemed most important, whereas the bottom not so.

As you can imagine, you need some materials. I've done this with single serving cereal boxes, but you could use any box. You'll need some paper/card, glue or sticky tape and markers.

The process:

1. **Fill the box** – this is the establishing stage where you inform the participants of the idea, the users and the feature or functions to be focused on.
2. **Make the box** – this is the practical exercise where small groups work together agreeing on their box. It's good to provide some context relative to the use of a box, namely that it would appear on a crowded supermarket shelf ... you need to make it stand out to the customer.
  - What is displayed prominently?
  - What are the benefits?
  - What imagery would you display?
  - Does it have a slogan?
3. **Sell the box** – the last stage has each team going through their box design, explaining why they have positioned items on the various box locations, which were the most important points to get across and which less so.
4. Combine the designs and achieve consensus between teams on what's important. Anything where there is a vast difference in opinion should be discussed for a better understanding and perhaps reaching an agreement.

In workshops where design options have been generated, in order to agree on ideas and bring focus to the designs the group want to pursue further and refine, you'll want a simple voting scheme. The easiest way to do this is with stickers. Each participant is given three stickers (assuming there are at least half a dozen options to choose from). They are then asked to place a sticker on the three designs they like. Count up the stickers and summarise which designs got the most votes and will be carried forward.

### Workshop Closing

Close the session by summarising what has been done in the workshop: how the session began and the outputs after each activity. Now tell the attendees what happens next: are there any planned follow-up sessions, when will the designs be fleshed out, tested etc., how they can stay up to date on what's going on in the project?

Finally thank them for their time and fantastic efforts!

### After the Workshop

Take photos of everything that was generated – especially walls of sticky notes which tend to fall off the wall and go missing, or affinity groups lost. Digitalise any lists so that these are easier to refer to and socialise if required.

Ask participants for any feedback: what did they think? What went well or not so well?

Over time, don't forget to share any findings and keep the participants up to date on the project and any follow-on activities – invite them to user testing sessions.

## REFERENCES

Workshops

<https://www.system-concepts.com/insights/exploring-ux-workshops/>

<http://www.uxforthemasses.com/ux-workshops/>

Icebreaker games

<http://www.crinid.com/ideation/12-icebreakers-to-kick-start-your-brainstorm>

Six Thinking Hats

<https://www.slideshare.net/MCROPPER/brainstorming-ideas-with-6-hats>

Alternative version of Six Hats for design critiques

<https://blog.prototypr.io/six-thinking-hats-c6285bcd9f3>