

You got a problem?... You got a problem?...

Apply some creativity

On the 2nd and 3rd March, the LIHNN/HCLU Residential event took place at The Ramada Hotel, Blackrod, Bolton. Blackrod, not to be confused with Blackrod, the functionary of the Palace of Westminster. Hardly compatible, illogical even, you might say – town and a person – but therein are the opportunities for exercising creativity. **Neil Foley** writes about the proceedings of this year's course, Problem-solving and Creative Thinking.

This two-day residential, led by Deborah Dalley, sought to convey the message that creativity can be applied to problem-solving. At every turn there are opportunities to solve problems - and thereby contribute to the economy, health economy or otherwise - identify users' information needs; setting up new information services; developing marketing strategies; designing document templates; reviewing policies and procedures; or devising training workshops. The list could go on, as I'm sure you appreciate.

An appropriate starting point was answering a few questions to determine whether a person was inclined to be creative or analytical in their thinking, after which the following table was presented to highlight the difference in approaches:

ANALYTICAL THINKING	CREATIVE THINKING
Select the best approach	Generate different approaches
Directional: Moves only if there is a direction in which to move	Unfocused: Moves in order to generate a direction
Judgemental: Evaluates the feasibility of ideas	Non-judgemental: Suspends judgement
Sequential: Moves forward in logical steps	Non-sequential: Jumps around
Focuses on what is relevant	Irrelevant: Happy to play around with irrelevant ideas
Familiar: Follows the most likely path	Unfamiliar: Explores the least likely paths
Destination-orientated: Expects to come up with an answer	Exploratory: Not compelled to come up with an answer

Variously, some people were wholly creative and most people, on the day, had a mix of creative and analytical. Given that lateral thinking is an essential skill in information seeking, it is perhaps not surprising that the majority of peoples' results scored higher on the creative side. Deborah encouraged the use of lateral

thinking. Indeed, books on display for viewing at break times included publications by the celebrated originator of lateral thinking, Edward de Bono.

Left and Right Brain

We were asked to draw a tree – not so difficult. However, if we were right-handed, we were asked to draw the tree with our left hand and vice-versa. As expected, the results were of variable quality. If we didn't already know it, this simple exercise reminded us that the brain is split into two halves - left and right-hand, each processing information differently. Physiotherapists advise some patients to use tennis balls as an integral part of exercises. Similarly, when reading textual documents, *Men's Health* recommend squeezing a tennis ball in your right-hand, in the process stimulating the left-side of your brain. Alternatively, if you're reading instructions with diagrams, squeeze the tennis ball in your left-hand, conversely, when the right-side of your brain will be stimulated. (See table: Left and Right Brain).

LEFT BRAIN	RIGHT BRAIN
Linear	Spatial
Verbal	Visual
Analysis	Perception
Evaluation	Creativity
One solution	Many solutions

May I suggest that you test this out. If you're right-handed and you normally pick up the telephone with your left hand and write notes

with your right hand, reverse the process – i.e. Pick up the phone receiver with your right hand and listen with your right ear. Of course, that may well present the problem of not being able to write (legible) notes with your left hand. For the purposes of this test, perhaps it would be best to keep the subject of the conversation to something that is relatively straight forward

and therefore easily remembered. Oh! - to be ambidextrous, as were some of the attendees on the course. Alternatively, regarding the same subject / problem, for one telephone conversation use one ear and for another conversation, use the other ear. Keep notes and compare the results. And if you're Captain Kirk of the U.S.S. Enterprise, try using your *final frontier*. "That's illogical, Captain." It might be illogical but it's creative.

Brainstorming

One method of generating ideas on a given subject / problem is that of brainstorming. Although an individual can brainstorm on their own, it generally works better in groups. The rules are fairly straight forward:

- Everything should be written down
- Ideas should never be criticised or evaluated
- Quantity is more important than quality

The important point is that ideas should be free-flowing. As it's freewheeling in character, the temptation to stop and think should be resisted. Just go with the flow. Do not stop to ask: How are we going to do that? Critical or analytical thinking can follow later. Stopping to think at this stage ebbs the flow of ideas and, rather like laughter, the generation of ideas can be infectious. Naturally, the willingness of any one person people to contribute creative / illogical / outlandish ideas can reflect the degree to which that person is comfortable within that particular group. On a positive note, the greater the diversity of ideas whipped-up tends to avoid the inhibiting effect of group-think. On the point of personality mix, it was interesting to note that, for some of the exercises, Deborah purposefully directed us where to sit. Some people might have felt discomforted by changing seating arrangements, preferring the *comfort zone* of the familiar but it was an important element to demonstrate the dynamism of different personalities working together. Incidentally, another approach for which the same rules as brainstorming apply is that of Random Associations. Paradoxically, it is a technique that is used by psychoanalysts; a fusion of creative and analytical.

As mentioned, the complement to creative is analytical. Expansive thinking, such as was exercised with brainstorming, may be contrasted with the focused, analytical thinking required for the exercise entitled *Unscrambling the Bank Accounts*. This exercise called for deduction and was certainly one instance when an eye for detail came to the fore. Some people struggled with this whilst others glided through it swan-like. This contrast in capacity may be not so

much a reflection of intelligence, rather, it perhaps highlights differences in preferred learning styles. Those wishing to develop their analytical thinking skills were encouraged to seek out logic puzzle books.

Sensory Stimulation

Creativity may be stimulated by heightening ALL FIVE senses – hearing, sight, touch, taste and smell. For example, eat food you've never eaten before, visit a country you've never visited before, change your perfume / aftershave, wear clothes of different cloth, decorate your home in a radically different colour scheme, strike up a conversation with a stranger or read a newspaper you've never read, join an organisation as a volunteer, try a different TV/ radio station or learn to play a musical instrument. There's a whole world out there! One step could be the beginning of a progressive series of steps. As they say, *The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step*. Incidentally, journeying and finding new physical routes develops new neural pathways in the brain, avoiding auto-pilot mode.

On the specific point of sight, Deborah drew everybody's attention to pithy words promoted by the Department of Trade & Industry:

Look where everyone else is looking
See what no one else is seeing
Do what no one else is doing

Regarding hearing, some people stimulate creativity by having music playing in the background whilst thinking. But that doesn't suit everybody.

Problem Checklist

Notwithstanding the benefits of venturing beyond the *comfort zone*, at other points during the two days, relative stability within established groups supported the development of a rapport, facilitating the discussion of a personal problem area. In this context, each group was asked to address a problem presented by one member of the group, applying the structure provided by the Problem Checklist. (See Problem Checklist).

Problem Diagnosis

One method discussed relating to problem diagnosis was that of Force Field Analysis (FFA). In terms of attempting to affect a change, Deborah explained FFA in terms of two sets of forces – those which drive the change and those which restrain it. The stronger of the two will determine the outcome.

Essentially, in applying FFA, there are a few stages:

- Decide upon the situation that you wish to change and describe the current situation.
- Looking to the future, describe how the future appears to you and how you would like it to be. In other words, apply visualisation.
- Having performed the descriptive element, you then have to identify the separate driving forces which will encourage and those which will restrain the change.

- Systematically, assess the character of each of the forces, taking into account their relative strength / weakness. Do you have any control over any of the factors? Alternatively, are you able to influence any of the factors?

Reviewing the picture to date, in transit between the current situation and your visualised condition, you will now need either to add more driving forces / remove restraining forces, or possibly perform both. The stronger likelihood of success, apparently, comes with focusing attention on the restraining factors. Therefore, develop action plans to remove those factors. Implement the action plans and evaluate.

In terms of evaluation, Deborah suggested the following method:

- Listing possible solutions
- Ranking solutions according to importance – (i.e. numbered scale: 5= Extremely important, 4 = very important and so on). If working in a group, total up the number of points allocated per person to each idea. The idea(s) with the highest score should be considered worthy of implementation.

PROBLEM CHECKLIST

Select one member of your team to own the problem and then use the following checklist to better understand their problem.

1. DEFINE THE PROBLEM
Write a one sentence headline defining the problem.
2. BACKGROUND
Describe:
 - What the present situation is
 - How the problem has occurred
3. WHY IS THERE A PROBLEM
Describe:
 - Why it is a problem to you
 - Why it should be solved
4. HISTORY
Explain:
 - What has been tried to solve the problem in the past
 - Why did this not work
 - What else has been thought of
 - Why it has not been tried
 - Why it would not work
 - Who else is in a similar situation
 - What have they done to address the problem

Conclusion

Although this two-day residential, entitled *Problem-solving and Creative Thinking*, was targeted at Assistant / Deputy Librarians, most, if not all, of the content could be applied by any member of the library staff – and should be. Indeed, the methods could be applied to any situations which present problems, whether in your library, in your personal life – or wherever. In a recent edition of *Men's Health* it was reported that a survey of more than 1000 managers had found that *innovation and creativity... the most important qualities for surviving in the working world*.

To lift an innovative thought from the level of a creative idea into a practical reality, subjecting the idea to critical analysis, is generally a good idea. For optimum performance therefore, not least in terms of time, hybridity is the key word. Being able to switch from analytical to creative mode as different types of problems present themselves is the ideal situation. Deborah said that it is "...a matter of recognising the differences (between creative thinking and analytical thinking) in order to be able to use both effectively." As Meryl Streep once said in an interview with Barry Norman, *One must have bread and one must have wine*.

If a person experiences a relative imbalance between the two approaches – creative and analytical – Deborah suggested that effort should be concentrated on applying appropriate methods to raise the performance of the weaker of the two, with a view to achieving the two working in concert.

Perhaps the same could be said in developing beyond one's preferred learning styles.

Certainly, variety is the spice of life. Purposefully exposing oneself to new experiences increases the likelihood of being able to relate to a broader range of people, from all walks of life. Essentially, preparation for enhanced networking – particularly applicable if you find yourself in a rut. Anyone for tennis?..... Remember that you are limited only by your imagination and that creative thoughts don't have to be logical. My apologies to any aficionados of *Star Trek*.

Labelling Creative as C and Analytical as A, to maximise thinking, ideally, it is not so much C or A but rather C and A - or maybe even C&A – which reminds me, I need to do some clothes shopping. Yet another example of creative / lateral / illogical connections.

The event was facilitated by
Training Consultant, Deborah Dalley.
Tel: 01706 826054 Mobile: 07949 497730
E-mail: deborah.dalley@virgin.net

References

Men's Health. Have your best year ever, Jan 2004, pp.82-87.