

CRAWFORD SLIP WRITING

This method was developed by Crawford in the USA in the 1920s, for gathering ideas from large groups (even up to 5000 people, though much easier to handle with, say, 50–200), and has been subsequently adapted by Clark. It is in effect one of the earliest forms of brainwriting, and for small groups it reduces to a simple ‘private idea generation’ phase. It is used with large gatherings of people in, say, a lecture theatre or hall. It is in many respects the text predecessor of a modern radio or TV ‘phone-in’.

1. Each person is given a stack or note-pad of at least 25 small slips of, paper (e.g. A6 paper). Sometimes the pads have been pre-prepared to include idea-jogging graphics, etc. For larger groups, the time-and-motion of handling the pads in Step 5 becomes critical, so the pad needs to be designed so that the ideas can be separated and sorted easily.
2. At appropriate points in the general proceedings, problem statements are read out to the group using any of the well-established formulae such as: ‘How to...’ or ‘In what ways might we ...’. Normally you are looking for ideas for solutions, but in some cases you might want to get ideas for alternative problems statements, or related issues, etc.
3. Participants are told to write ideas of the required kind one per sheet, in any order. Sometimes it may be appropriate to display images or words to the whole meeting to act as triggers. A variant is to get participants to work in twos or threes (e.g. with others sitting near to them), one person writing down the ideas for two or three people.
4. When writing has begun to slow down (usually five to ten minutes) the note-pads are collected.
5. If rapid feedback is being attempted, the booklets are immediately divided up between the members of a team of helpers who each begin to sort their own sample (e.g. by frequency of occurrence and/or feasibility). If more sophisticated categorisation is needed, then the categories will probably have to be pre-determined (e.g. from an earlier pilot), so that each team member can work to the same categories. For a very large meeting, it may be best to present the early feedback as examples drawn from a limited random sample of booklets.
6. Feedback during the same meeting is difficult to achieve. However, for an event lasting several days (such as a conference) quite sophisticated feedback within the duration of

FUNCTION

Exploring
Defining
Gathering
Generating
Grouping
Screening
Prioritising
Planning
Full process

RESOURCES

1(–2) people
Large group
Brief
Extended
Facilitation skills
Special setting
Computing

PROBLEM

Personal
Multiple issues
Stakeholders
New product
Futures/plans

ANALYTIC MODE

Categorising
Causality
Checklist/table
Combinatorial
Mapping
Numerical

QUESTIONING

Reframing
Scanning
Scenarios/views
Surveys, etc
Uses experts

VOTING

INTUITIVE MODE

Analogy
Distortion
Excursion
Hitch-hiking
Imagery
Kinaesthetic
Listening
Pictures
Relaxation
Role-play/empathy
Subconscious
Values
Verbal
Wishing

SOCIAL MODE

Ad hoc/cover
Anything goes!
Debate/dialogue
Game
Interactive events
Moving about
Networking
Nominal
Starter’s kit

the conference may well be possible if the logistics are well planned. Rapid feedback from a large exercise can be quite a *coup de théâtre* if organised successfully.

7. After the early feedback, analysis and evaluation can continue at a steadier pace to identify the most useful ideas, and develop them into workable proposals.
8. A final feedback report is often valuable.

This technique can provide an effective way of generating large numbers of ideas very quickly, and of creating a sense of democratic responsiveness to 'grass-roots' ideas.

However, particularly if the group is very large, the mass dynamics of timing, mood, image, 'warm-up', cultural acceptability, etc. can be crucial. Under the wrong conditions, people may feel embarrassed, angry or resentful at being asked to participate. Conversely, if you create a very positive crowd mood, people may develop exaggerated expectations about your capacity to follow up their ideas, and become disillusioned when very few ideas are taken up.

Modern developments of this are automated techniques where participants have electronic voting buttons or (in smaller numbers) each have their own networked computer and keyboard (cf. *GroupSystems*).

The evidence from computer studies suggests that provided that pace and energy can be maintained and that the logistics can be handled (a difficult achievement) there is no 'optimal group size' – the larger the group, the more ideas you will get, though obviously there is a law of diminishing returns.

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