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Using Consensus Workshop in the Classroom: Promoting Participation and Collaboration in Large Group Settings

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Abstract

Encouraging engagement when teaching groups of students can prove challenging. Consensus Workshop offers a low cost and flexible approach to the facilitation of large group discussions, appropriate with all levels of learners, and across disciplines. Particularly powerful at encouraging student engagement and collaboration in the classroom, it has proven popular with students and academic peers. This article discusses the application of the Consensus Workshop across a range of classroom situations, outlines how to become familiar with the technique, and details the resources required to use the approach.

Keywords

consensus methods, group teaching, student engagement, collaborative learning

Resource Description

Consensus Workshop is participatory group approach developed by Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA), a not-for-profit body, as one of their range of “technologies of participation.” Designed for community development, it has been subsequently applied as a strategic business planning tool (Spencer, 1989). ICA describes itself as a “global community of non-profit organisations advancing human development worldwide” with a participatory, community development focus. ICA uses these

technologies of participation to support “sustainable transformation of individuals, communities and organisations” (for more information, see <http://www.ica-international.org/about-us/>).

I trained in this technique while working in arts management, where it was used to support organisational planning and communication, and engagement within community music projects. I have since adapted this approach to academic settings over the past 7 years. Whilst another related ICA technology, focussed conversation, is used in education (Nelson, 2013), Consensus Workshop does not appear to have been used for this purpose. As such, this is a novel application of the technique, and my own experience has demonstrated the effectiveness of Consensus Workshop as a classroom activity.

Whilst group discussion forms a mainstay of many academics’ repertoire, it can be problematic to engage groups beyond a dozen students in one single conversation, leading to the necessity of breaking into smaller groups. However, small groups can create fragmented conversations, while larger groups tend to mean not everyone will join in. Consensus Workshop overcomes fragmentation by offering a clear structure around which to facilitate discussions in groups up to 40 or so, ensuring that all participants have an opportunity to contribute and influence the outcome of a single, jointly held discussion. Its use of a visual aid to support discussion then forms a record of the final, mutually developed consensus. As an innovative approach, it offers an alternative to established discussion techniques.

Consensus Workshop: A Staged Approach

A Consensus Workshop consists of five stages to the collecting and organisation of information, supported by a physical resource of a “sticky wall” (see Figure 1).

The workshop begins with a “context” stage, which uses a focus question to set the scene for the activity. This is usually a “what” question. For example, when teaching employability to undergraduate students, I have posed the question, “What might employers look for when recruiting graduates?” I have also successfully run workshops using “why” and “how” focus questions.

There follows a “brainstorm” stage, in which participants develop individual or small group responses to the question. Participants write their responses on cards made from half sheets of printer paper, following conventions about size and length of text to ensure these are legible to the whole room, with a target of around 40 cards from the whole group. Figure 2 illustrates this stage, showing the small groups and their cards developed in response to the focus question.

In the next stage, “cluster,” participants share the cards they feel are most significant or important to their group. The facilitator moves the cards to reflect patterns and commonalities identified by the group. Participants then share cards that differ from those visible, and further sorting occurs. The facilitator tags groups of cards with a symbol to allow participants to add any further cards and discuss clusters without settling on concrete definitions. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate early and later stages of this process.

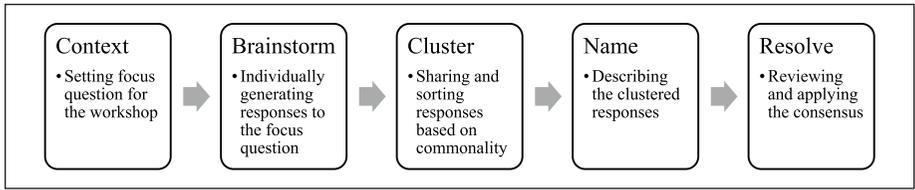


Figure 1. Stages of Consensus Workshop.

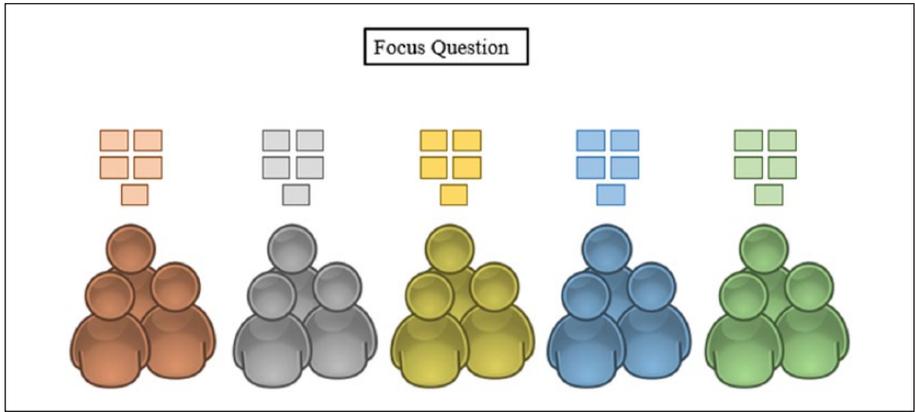


Figure 2. Context and brainstorm stages.

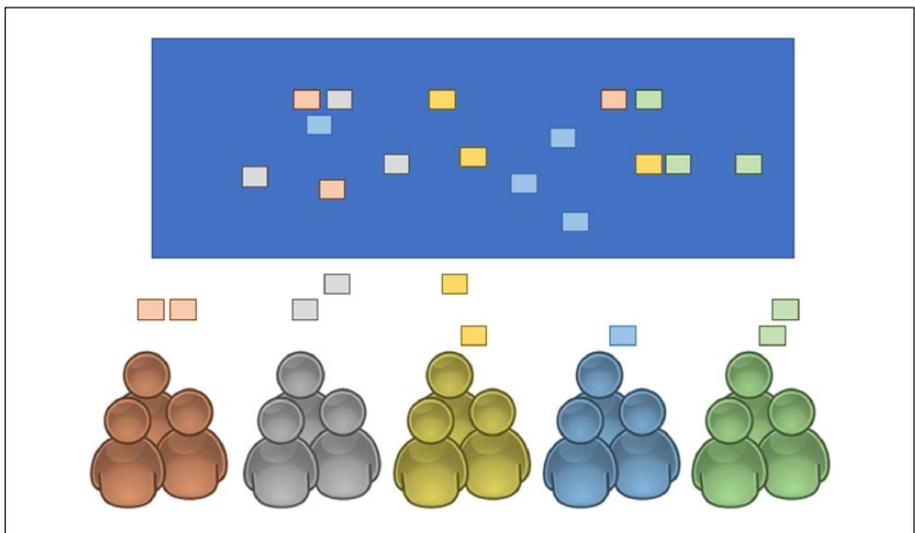


Figure 3. An early stage of the clustering process.

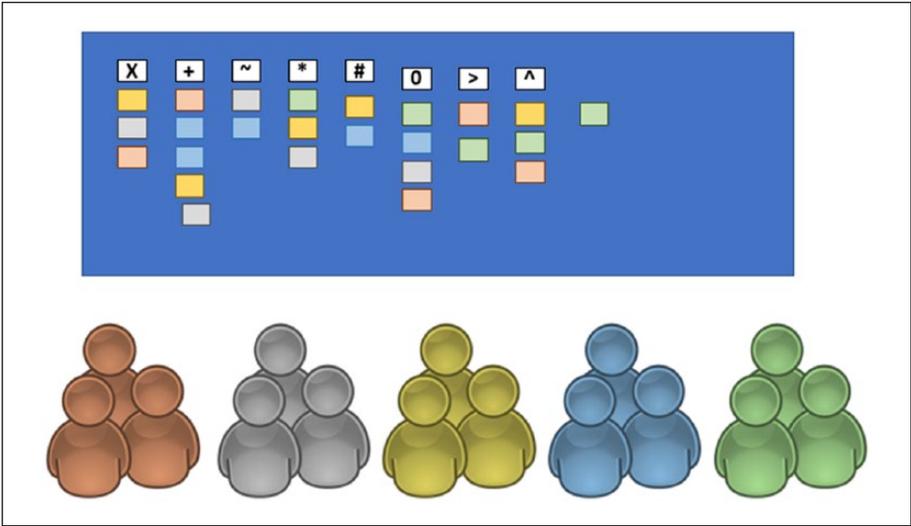


Figure 4. A later stage of the clustering process, with clusters “tagged.”

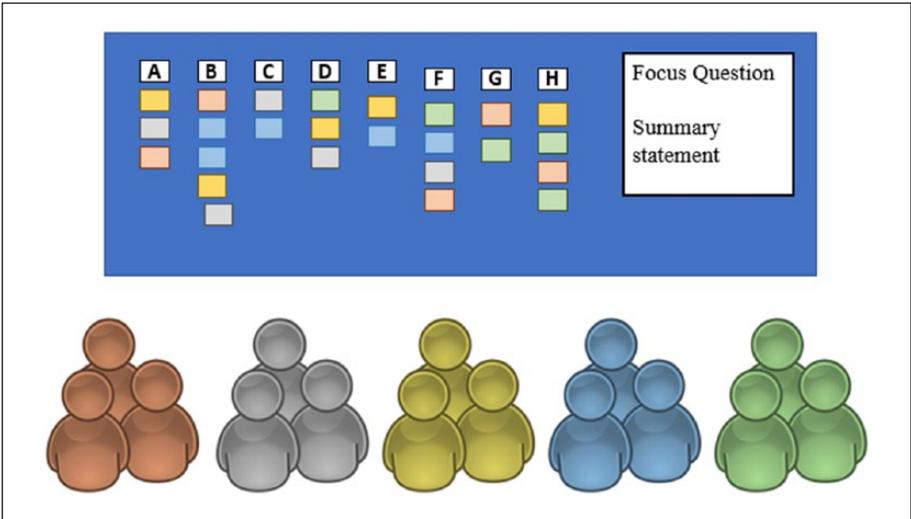


Figure 5. The completed, named and resolved wall.

In the penultimate “name” stage, the participants give each cluster a short description, which responds to the initial focus question. In the final stage “resolve,” the facilitator helps the group review the completed consensus and leads a discussion of how this consensus could be used. Figure 5 illustrates these stages. In practice, this last stage can be quite brief, but the total workshop usually takes between 30 and 90 minutes.

Use in the Classroom

I have used this technique with a broad range of learners, including undergraduate and postgraduate students, professional learners, and academic peers. It is best suited to seminar groupings of between 5 and 40 students. Whilst facilitating larger groups is possible, it requires multiple facilitators and stages, and I have not yet tried jointly facilitating such a large group. I have found the approach useful in introductory and concluding sessions in a module, to set the scene, or to draw together varied topics. It is particularly helpful when exploring a single topic in depth, such as a case study. Once learned, the technique can be readily adapted to a range of purposes, and so the examples set out below are at best indicative.

I began using Consensus Workshop as a consolidation activity at the end of modules. For example, on a postgraduate module on employee relations, with a group of approximately 20 students, I asked, “What encourages good employee relations within an organisation?” I wanted to enable students to synthesise the various topics studied over the 10 weeks of the module, while preparing them for the assessment to come. Once they had brainstormed initial ideas, the clustering process allowed the students to find commonality between their opinions and brought together diverse viewpoints across the broader area of employee relations. For example, several students offered cards that emphasised different aspects of communication, and quickly combined these into one cluster. Other clusters formed around trust, clear policies, engagement issues, and so on. Each of these clusters therefore formed one response to the initial “what” question. Once collated, the students were then able to produce a single sentence statement that summarised their views on what led to effective employee relations. This process supported their recall of the module content, with the response to the focus question leading towards the subsequent assessment topic. Using Consensus Workshop in this way facilitated learning consolidation, and encouraged collaborative group scaffolding between participants (Fernández, Wegerif, Mercer, & Rojas-Drummond, 2001). This example demonstrates the potential for Consensus Workshop to support both criticality and review of material.

Similarly, I have used Consensus Workshop as a technique for analysing case studies, framing the focus question around “What has led to the issues experienced by the case organisation?” In this example, the process supported very deep analysis through the discussion of different viewpoints, which was shown in the final consensus.

The method works well in other settings. For example, it has proved helpful during initial introductions to university studies, where I have used it to help explore student expectations and concerns about academic study. I subsequently used the clusters as topics for later discussions. This example demonstrates the potential to use Consensus Workshop during collaborative curriculum development (see Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014).

I have also found the method works well in impromptu situations. For example, I had planned to discuss a specific topic in a training program for new academic staff, but the group members were particularly interested in a different topic. I was able to use my training in Consensus Workshop to make a last-minute change and meet the

students' needs. Used in this way, Consensus Workshop would be helpful when stepping into a colleague's absence, as it requires little prior planning and can be used to summarise and review topics without the facilitator needing significant subject expertise.

Feedback from academic peers has suggested that the technique would also adapt well to eliciting student feedback and evaluation, supporting the development of literature reviews through the categorisation of reading topics, enlivening less exciting topics, and supporting revision sessions. The potential applications seem extensive.

Becoming Familiar With Consensus Workshop

There are two possible routes to familiarisation with the process: via a textbook or attending dedicated, internationally delivered training. Both offer a detailed introduction to the approach. I took part in the latter but have found the text, *The Workshop Book* (Stanfield, 2002), helpful in refreshing and maintaining my knowledge. This book is fairly short but comprehensive, and users would find Chapters 4 to 9 most helpful in developing a sufficient understanding of the process. The training offers greater insight, but the cost and time implications make Stanfield's text a more accessible route for exploring this technique for the individual.

The technology is very powerful in the classroom, as the "sticky wall" is immediately engaging. This is a sheet of rip-stop nylon, coated in repositionable spray adhesive, which functions like a giant sticky note in reverse, allowing the user to place and reposition sheets of paper at will. Facilitators can purchase a wall from ICA, but they can also be readily improvised. In smaller groups, alternative approaches of flip charts or sticky-notes work well, but are both more expensive long term and less accessible or impactful in larger group settings.

Analysis

Consensus Workshop has a recognised commonality with brainstorming and Delphi techniques (Stanfield, 2002). It is also similar to nominal group (see McMillan, King, & Tully, 2016, for a discussion of both nominal group and Delphi) and the KJ technique and affinity diagrams (see Hanington & Martin, 2012). Where it may offer advantages over these techniques is in its discursive emphasis, the visibility of differing viewpoints, and the engagement opportunities found through the physical technology.

The staged approach enables group members to articulate their thinking clearly. It also supports recognition of areas of similarity and divergence in their ideas. The initial brainstorm is supportive of the recall of factual knowledge whilst the later collaboration requires a metacognitive analysis of the information generated through discussion.

In particular, Consensus Workshop is a powerful tool for classroom engagement, requiring everyone to participate. The sticky wall supports engagement, as most participants are initially surprised that the cards stay stuck to the wall, and curiosity can bring reluctant contributors out of their seats to try it out. For this reason, I often use

the wall as a stand-alone resource for other whole group activities, for example, building timelines and flowcharts or developing classifications.

The workshop is highly adaptable, making it suitable for many topics and situations and a wide range of learners. The size of the cards used supports those with visual impairments much better than small-scale sticky notes can, whilst the role of the facilitator in physically manipulating the wall can support participants with mobility requirements. Furthermore, the financial investment associated with implementing the Consensus Workshop can be quite low, with the initial outlay on a sticky wall and Stanfield's text being moderate. There are no further significant costs beyond the consumables of spray adhesive and printer paper.

However, the approach is not without issue, and in my experience, these are generally twofold. Firstly, the process needs careful management. Participants tend to become very engaged, and the depth and enthusiasm can overrun the time allowed. I would therefore encourage the novice user to stick to non-controversial topics initially. Likewise, conversation can become stuck on minor issues if not carefully handled, losing engagement across the wider group. As with any group activity, Consensus Workshop requires classroom management skills, as strongly held views or dominant personalities can interrupt the process. Finally, some learners can find the strictures of the stages uncomfortable, seeking a more free-form approach.

Secondly, the sticky wall itself can be problematic. Physically, it requires temporary mounting on a vertical flat surface of up to 5 metres, necessitating appropriate classroom space. The sticky wall is inherently low-tech, and some participants would prefer a digital alternative, which technologies designed for affinity diagrams may potentially provide (Widjaja & Takahashi, 2016).

In summary, therefore, Consensus Workshop, when adapted to classroom settings, is both flexible and inclusive and is a relatively affordable addition to classroom activities. Individuals interested in exploring the potential in their own teaching are encouraged to visit <http://www.ica-international.org> for details of their regional centre, from which both sticky walls and training courses can be sourced. The text *The Workshop Book* can be readily purchased online. In the United Kingdom, it is also held by the British Library and is, therefore, available via interlibrary loan.

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