

Assessing Projects: Gauging Student Needs Brainstorming

Generating Ideas

Before students learn about a topic, it is essential to activate their background knowledge. Brainstorming is a useful way to get them started or to help them generate new ideas without fear of criticism or reproach. To begin, ask students to generate as many ideas about the topic as possible, and encourage them to include outrageous ideas, new and unusual techniques, or ideas that expand on previous comments and suggestions that have worked for them in the past. Record the ideas generated from brainstorming on a chart for all students to see.

After the initial list is generated, ask students to categorize the ideas into subtopics. These might include ideas they already know about or are unsure of, or ideas to work on now or to study in the future. The following questions can help guide the discussion: What do we already know about this topic?

- What does this list tell us?
- Can we learn about all of these ideas given the time we have to work on our project?
- Which ideas from this list should be our priority?
- Are there other ideas we've not thought of now that we've discussed the list in detail?

After the discussion, ask students to reflect on the activity in their journals. This can either be left open-ended or ask students to record the ideas they generated and explain which ones they are going to use in their project and which ones they still have questions about. Afterwards, review the journal responses to assess students thinking.

There are a few variations on traditional brainstorming, but they all serve the same purpose—to activate prior knowledge.

ABC Brainstorm

In this method, ask students to list the letters of the alphabet down a sheet of paper. Then prompt them to write a word or phrase that could be associated with the topic for each letter. Begin by having students work individually, then pair them up or have them work in small groups to try to fill in all of the letters. Finally have students share their lists and give justifications for the words or phrases they've chosen.

Carousel Brainstorm

In this method, divide the class into small groups and provide each group with a large sheet of paper with a different subtopic or idea listed at the top. Allocate a short period of time for groups to brainstorm as many ideas related to their topic as possible. Then have groups pass their sheets on to the next group, and so on, until each group has been given the opportunity to add their ideas to every sheet. At the end of the brainstorming session, post all of the sheets so that they can be viewed by the entire class. Lead a discussion to debrief the activity or return the original sheet to each group and ask them to reflect on all of the additional ideas that each group added to their original brainstormed list.