

Affinity Diagramming

Affinity diagramming at its most basic is “putting like with like”. It is a useful technique when a number of groups or individuals are working on the same particular issue, challenge or need and their work needs to be organized into a coherent whole. It can be successfully managed in wide ranging sizes of groups and circumstances, from clustering brainstormed ideas to categorizing verbatim responses to survey questions. Affinity diagramming allows multiple perspectives and ways of organizing to be used to eventually arrive at a consensus of content categorization.

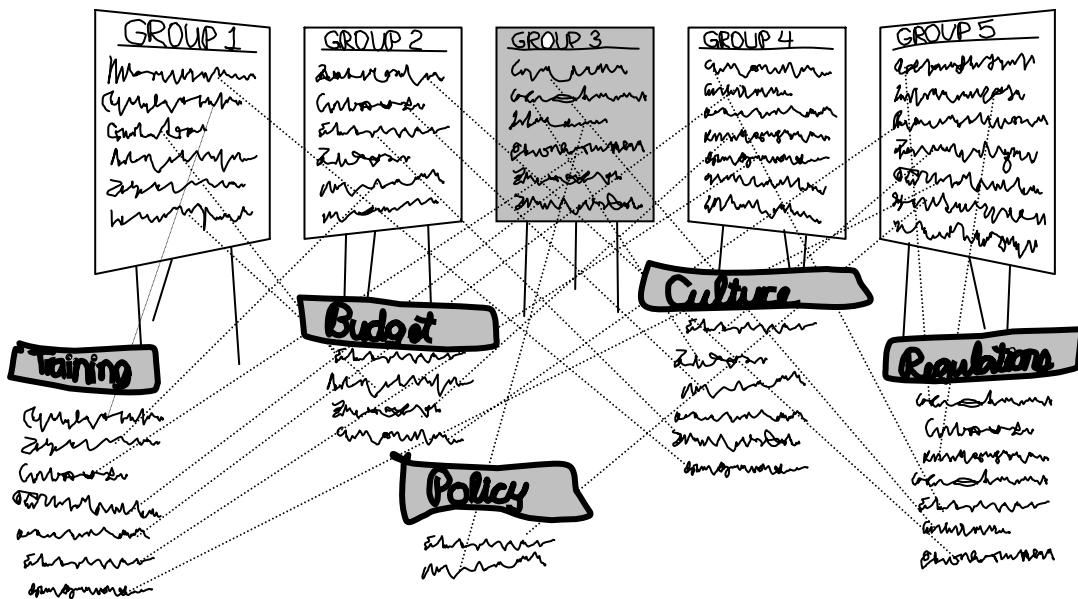
In Affinity Diagramming all contributions to the group’s thinking are preserved but are aggregated by subject matter—rather than by group. The illustration below conveys this transformation.

The most often used alternative for these purposes is the List Reduction Technique, which basically operates on the principle of eliminating duplication among items. This is a more cumbersome and time consuming approach which also has the unfortunate effect of glossing over subtle differences and “crossing out” ideas that are not truly duplicative of others—just apparently quite similar. In this sense, list reduction impairs the validity of the output of group brainstorming or dialogue and simultaneously can irritate and frustrate contributors of ideas that are eliminated.



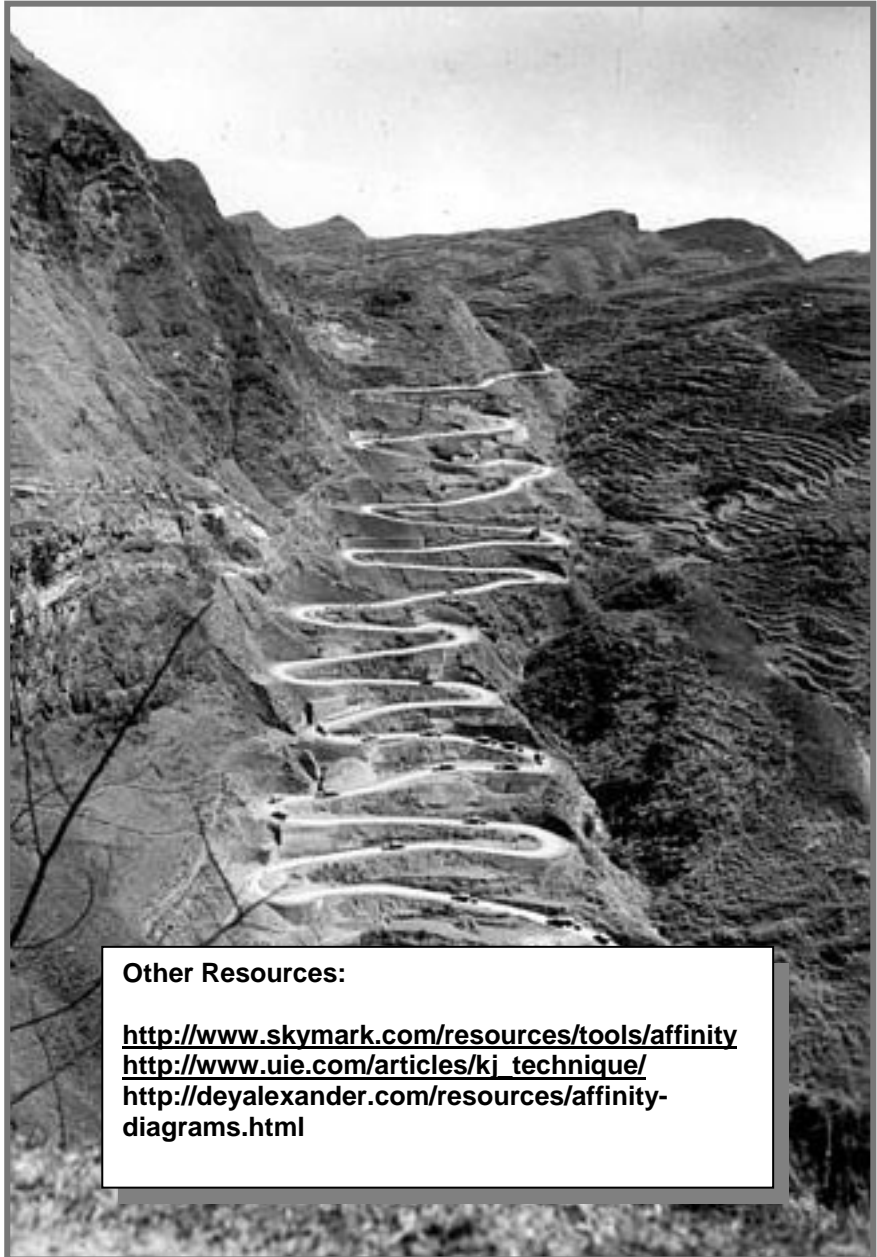
Discussion Question: “What should we consider in implementing our new marketing initiative?”

THE KICKER...
THE SORTING IS DONE
IN COMPLETE SILENCE



Technique Execution Tips

- Underline key words so participants can see the essential content of an item from a distance
- Work from original writing, when possible, rather than transcribed versions
- Expect “waves” of participation (“first responders”, “refiners”, “word-smithers”---they all contribute)
- Be comfortable with the silence yourself
- Don’t do any labeling until the group acknowledges that it is finished moving items
- Predict sub-affinity work prior to writing up summaries of clusters
- Check very general labels to see if they are “umbrellaing” sub-clusters



Other Resources:

<http://www.skymark.com/resources/tools/affinity>
http://www.uie.com/articles/kj_technique/
<http://deyalexander.com/resources/affinity-diagrams.html>