Affinity Diagram

Purpose:
To organize large groups of information into meaningful categories. The affinity diagram helps break old patterns of thought, reveal new patterns, and generate more creative ways of thinking. This tool is an interesting method for gathering and organizing huge quantities of information (especially written or verbal comments) and allows participants to naturally group ideas and show the relationships between items and groups.

The affinity diagram helps organize the learners' thoughts most effectively when:

- The issues seem too large and complex to grasp, not simple or immediate
- You need some way to break out of old, traditional ways of thinking
- Facts or thoughts are chaotic
- You need to quickly uncover your learners' requirements.

Materials:
3x3" Post-it notes
Chart paper or large wall

Procedure:

1. State the issue to be examined in broad terms, such as an open-ended question or statement.
2. People can either work individually or in pairs, if reading skills are low. Generate and record ideas using Post-it notes. Begin sticking them on a wall or large sheet of chart paper, in no particular order, and where everyone can see them. Ensure that everyone is included. Ask for a headline to describe each thought. Note the contributor's initials.
3. Arrange the notes in related or similar groupings. One person can also read aloud to others with less reading skill. Complete the groupings. This can be done by simply pulling up and replacing the post-its near others that are similar in nature. Involve the group in clustering the notes into 6-10 related groupings. Have everyone stand and do this silently. Be prepared for some loners. Avoid forcing them into a group. Some notes may need to be duplicated for different groupings and identical notes can either be thrown out or pasted on top of one another.
4. Choose a word or phrase that captures the intent of each group and place it at the top as a category name or title on the newsprint.
5. This diagram could be used as a brainstorming activity focused on helping the learner think about the issues that help or hinder them in continuing to pursue their educational goals. Discussion and an action plan for improvement could follow this initial thought process. Give each learner two dot stickies and ask them to vote on the categories they would most want the class to address together. Use these categories as guides to your curriculum development.

The affinity diagram can also be used as a method for creative writing and helping learners to organize their thoughts as part of the writing process.