Chapter Six: Faculty Retreat Planning Sessions at the City University of Hong Kong (Case Two)

6.1 Introduction

The second case was conducted in the Faculty of Business at the City University of Hong Kong during the late Summer and early Autumn of 1996. The case concerns a team of academic staff formed to discuss and decide upon issues for the annual faculty retreat - an event where all academic staff in the faculty are invited to discuss issues relating to the faculty and its development. The name of the team was the Faculty Retreat Planning Team (FRPT).

The objective of the team was very broad - to produce and prioritise topics to be discussed at the retreat. The convenor of the team, a senior academic in the Department of Information Systems, decided at an early stage that he would like to explore the use of GSS so as to facilitate the group discussion. The convenor had previously participated in other GSS activities run by the researcher. Thus, he realised which benefits could be expected from a GSS meeting. Initially, the FRPT had 6 members - one from each of the five departments (Business and Management, Applied Statistics and Operational Research, Economics and Finance, Accounting, and Information Systems) and the convenor. With the members' approval, the convenor sent out a general invitation (see Appendix 6.1) to participate to all academic staff in the Faculty of Business - some 87 people. As a result of this invitation, a number of staff expressed interest in participating in the FRPT and two meetings of the group were held, both of which made substantial use of the GSS.

6.2 The First Meeting of the FRPT

6.2.1 Pre-meeting Preparation

As preparation for the FRPT, the researcher and convenor met on several occasions so as to plan the activities to be conducted. A run-through of the GSS software was also undertaken so as to refresh the convenor's memory and explore possible mechanisms that might prove useful for the actual meeting. These various planning activities lasted longer than four hours. A number of key issues were discussed in these meetings. Firstly, the convenor wanted to ensure that the discussions were

well focused. To do this, he proposed that a number of codes be used by meeting participants, with all comments codified appropriately. The codes were as follows:

PRO - an argument in favour of the topic

CON - an argument against the topic

Q - a question about the topic

A - an answer to a question.

The convenor wished that whenever a new topic was created, the creator should immediately generate a comment to that topic with a PRO prefix. If other participants agreed, they should also use the PRO prefix, whereas if they disagreed, they should use a CON prefix. An example, taken from the first FRPT meeting illustrates this usage. The two comments relate to topic number ten:

10. Better research contacts with Businesses in HK & China

PRO: Gaining access is still difficult, good relations at the highest levels may help

CON: This may mean pragmatic acceptance of some unfortunate realities and politics.

Apart from the issue of protocol codes, various other subjects were discussed in the pre-meeting planning session. The convenor wished all topic and comment generation to be anonymous, since he realised that different hierarchy levels in the organisation would be represented and he did not want participants to be intimidated by others or inhibited from saying what they really thought. As far as the meeting content was concerned, the convenor decided to leave this entirely open, i.e. he did not want to lead the team members by providing any topics at the outset - all material should be generated by the participants themselves and on the spot. Furthermore, after consultation with the researcher, he agreed that participants should only be able to add ideas, not delete or otherwise modify. This restriction was necessary in order to prevent the possibility of comments being inadvertently, or maliciously, lost or changed by participants for any reason.

As a result of these discussions, a hand-out was produced, informing meeting participants of the purpose of the meeting, how it had been structured, what was expected of participants, what privileges had been given to participants, and so on. This was distributed in advance of the meeting to those fourteen staff who had replied to the email invitation to participate, with the request that they read it before

the meeting. A much reduced version of this handout was encapsulated in a set of participant instructions which was also available on-line in the GSS, viz.:

> Please generate ideas concerning the sessions which will be held at the Faculty Retreat.
>
> Under each idea, you should generate 'comments'. Please classify your comments as: PROs, CONs, Questions and Answers as explained in the demonstration.

It was also agreed that there should be a brief hands-on demonstration of the software for the meeting participants to ensure that they were familiar with it before the main idea generation and discussion session started. After the main idea generation session, which would use the Categoriser tool, a vote would be held to evaluate the suitability of the ideas raised for the retreat. If time permitted, this might be followed by a further activity where participants would be invited to nominate themselves as potential contributors/organisers of the session ideas suggested.

6.2.2 Action and Observation

A Computer Laboratory in the Department of Information Systems was booked for the first meeting of the FRPT and all terminals were logged in to the GSS thirty minutes before the meeting was due to start. Twelve members of the Faculty attended this meeting, which started on time with the convenor welcoming the participants, explaining the purpose of the meeting and introducing some rules and regulations which would govern the way that he preferred topics and comments to be generated. These were also available on-line in an instructions box and on the handout. The researcher then led the participants through a brief introduction to the software using the question "Where is your favourite holiday destination?" as a focus for easy idea generation. The researcher explained how the participants could add ideas and comments. The participants were then given no further instruction and encouraged to do it by themselves. After two minutes it appeared that there was a software problem - the ideas were not being distributed to the other participants. The researcher was both unable to fix this problem and unable to control the participant workstations. Consequently, all participants were requested to reboot their PCs, the damaged activity was repaired and the system restarted. The demonstration then continued smoothly.

The main task was started shortly afterwards with the generation and discussion of potential topics for the forthcoming retreat. Idea categorisation was not used, and therefore participants simply entered ideas and commented on those ideas. In order to minimise cognitive load for the participants, more sophisticated features of the interface were not introduced. At the end of thirty minutes, the privilege of the participants to add ideas or comments was disabled and they were only permitted to read existing ideas for the last five minutes. A total of 21 ideas and 147 comments were generated during this session. Table 6.1 shows the numbers of ideas and comments generated at five minute intervals.

Table 6.1 Idea and Comment Generation Rates for FRPT Meeting 1

Time from the start/mins	5	10	15	20	25	30
Ideas/per 5 mins	7	7	3	1	2	1
Ideas/cum. Total	7	14	17	18	20	21
Comments/per 5 mins	10	32	31	30	21	23
Comments/cum. total	10	42	73	103	124	147

The ideas were next transferred to the Vote tool where participants were requested to indicate whether they believed the topics were appropriate for the retreat using a simple Yes-No selection. One additional item was added to the ballot at this late stage, making a total of 22 items. Participants were not permitted to bypass when voting and so all participants were required to select either Yes or No for all 22 items. The convenor decided not to show the results to the participants, but to wind up this stage of the meeting and adjourn it to an adjacent meeting room where all the participants filled in a debriefing questionnaire relating to the processes in the meeting. They also engaged in a discussion of how they felt about the technology and its use in the meeting. No negative sentiments were expressed, and all present expressed an interest in holding future meetings using the same software to discuss issues related to the retreat. Furthermore, participants noted that had they not been able to make use of the GSS, they would have been unable to cover as many issues in the same amount of time. Perhaps they would not have even progressed beyond the first issue.

While this debriefing was taking place (led by the convenor), the researcher was compiling a report consisting of all ideas and comments generated in the meeting. The vote results were reformatted into an easier to read appearance. The report, containing a total of eleven pages, was printed out and given to the participants shortly after the meeting.

6.2.3 Reflections on the First Meeting: Researcher Observations

A number of reflections are pertinent here. The convenor had originally requested all participation to be textual, i.e. typed in, so as to ensure that all comments were captured. In practice, some participants ignored this and talked anyway. It seems to be unreasonable to prevent people from talking if they wish to do so. However, it is sensible to encourage people to include at least a summary of their discussion in the GSS. Any materials not typed in are "lost" to the other participants. We also found that the protocol codes - PRO, CON, etc. were not always used. This may have been due to forgetfulness in some cases, but one participant observed that some comments did not appear to fit into the codes specified and the coding was perhaps too rigid.

We found that on some occasions, a participant needs to ask the researcher a question about the software or to edit an item that has been mis-typed or entered in the wrong place. In order to facilitate this, it seems sensible to set up a dedicated "idea" which covers these issues. This can also help to preserve participant anonymity - which would be lost if the participant were to make the request verbally.

It was unfortunate that the software should be less than perfectly reliable and there is a clear lesson to learn here - expect the software to crash and be prepared for this. If the system is going to be down for more than thirty seconds, have something for the participants to do - this will probably be the convenor who must take over with some off-the-cuff crisis management. Another workaround for this is to have many more PCs available than are needed for the group size. If the software does crash, those PCs can be brought into use and started up in GSS much more quickly than the others which have to be rebooted. Participants can then just relocate themselves to sit at the other PCs.

A final comment here relates to the report. As the convenor debriefed the participants, the researcher was working hard to get the report out. In practice this took some time and required some careful editing so as to improve the format.

Printing and copying of sufficient copies (121 sheets in total) also took time. Although it is useful to be able to give the report to the participants immediately afterwards, in practice it may be impossible to do so. It would be more sensible to arrange to deliver the report later in the day or the next day.

6.2.4 Reflections on the First Meeting: Analysis of the Debriefing Questionnaire and Follow up Interviews

As already indicated, all participants completed a questionnaire (see Appendix 6.2) after the meeting. This elicited perceptions of a number of key meeting processes using the instrument previously described in Chapter Four. In addition, the researcher conducted interviews with all meeting participants in the days immediately subsequent to the meeting where additional information was collected.

Many participants felt that meeting time was too short - thirty minutes is insufficient to generate a significant number of ideas and to tackle what is a significant task. There was also a common area of concern in that when questions were asked, they were seldom answered. Several team members commented favourably on the anonymisation of communications, believing that it helped to facilitate communications. This was enhanced with the GSS software, since it meant that different people were not competing for air time with one another. The overall result of these features of the meeting was a more task focused discussion with honest, real views, not the views that you think others want to see. One senior team member (a full Professor) indicated that in a normal meeting, she would never say anything at all, unless specifically asked to do so, and then only unwillingly. In this anonymous, electronic discussion, she was more than willing to participate. Another team member believed that the anonymity made the presence of management representatives irrelevant so far as content restrictions were concerned. This view is borne out by the fact that team members discussed extensively the mechanics of evaluating the Dean and Heads of Department - a sensitive issue.

6.2.5 Reflections: Processes to Improve

In addition to the qualitative feedback, the debriefing questionnaire completed by participants was also used to collect quantitative data. Analysis of this data revealed a number of areas of concern. Table 6.3 below shows the data from this questionnaire for both the first and second meetings of the FRPT.

It would appear that the usefulness of the team members was not always clear, hence there is a need at the start of the meeting to explain why it is useful for people to be involved. At the same time, explaining how the output of the meeting will feed directly into the retreat sessions should make the importance of the meeting clearer.

We observed above that some team members complained about their questions not being answered. To attempt to solve this issue, it seems reasonable to recommend that if a person has created a session topic, or is keenly interested in a session topic, then it would be helpful to the other members if s/he can occasionally monitor that topic so as to answer questions within his/her competency. This will help to avoid the situation where there are many questions but few answers.

The rather short time available for the meeting precluded extensive discussions. Some team members noted that the time was too restricted and this is perhaps reflected in the fact that the discussion thoroughness question received a low score. The idea evaluation method employed - Yes/No - was, on reflection, quite suitable for identifying which issues should be included in those to be discussed at the faculty retreat, but less appropriate for generating consensus on issues, the more so as the results were not released to the team members. In future, it would be helpful to use a more discriminatory idea evaluation technique and also to return the evaluation results to team members. Extending the time available for discussion is not difficult, but in practice we found that several team members could not spare more than one hour for a meeting due to other commitments.

The percentage of time that team members believed had been spent on serious discussion was disturbingly low at 37% (though the software crash during the training session may have been a contributory factor). This figure is somewhat perplexing since team members seemed to appreciate the overall discussion process and the discussion quality scores are generally positive. The overall satisfaction expressed by team members with the meeting was marginally positive, i.e. between neutral and satisfied. This, as an outcome measure, may reflect the low percentage of time spent on serious discussion and other aspects of the meeting process. We can address this through an improvement in the facilitation style and the focus of discussion.

We requested team members to read the introductory handout before coming to the meeting in order to ensure that they were aware of the meeting purpose and

ready to generate ideas, but whether they actually did this is another matter. Similarly, we measured the team members' perceptions of the imaginativeness of discussions. We can encourage them to be more imaginative or creative in their discussions, but it depends primarily on their own ingenuity. Nonetheless, we have already observed that some participants commented that they were much more honest, which is a valuable component of discussion quality, i.e. not being constrained to any "normal" parameters.

6.3 The Second FRPT Meeting

6.3.1 Planning

In order to try to increase the number of team members, we reissued our invitation (see Appendix 6.3) to all the academic staff of the Faculty of Business before the second meeting. Nineteen people expressed interest, yet only nine attended the meeting. Before the meeting, the convenor and researcher held a pre-meeting planning session, lasting approximately ninety minutes. Since formal procedures had already been set up for the first meeting, less time was required. During this pre-planning meeting, the materials generated in the first meeting were reviewed and it was agreed that they should be categorised so as to make for a more focused discussion in the second meeting. Seven categories were accordingly created and the topics allocated as appropriate. It was also agreed that instead of using a simple Yes-No selection of ideas for inclusion in the faculty retreat, we would use a rank ordering system where team members would be requested to indicate their preferred order of ideas by moving them into the appropriate order.

Just before the start of the meeting, the convenor changed the meeting plan. Rather than continuing to discuss the previous week's items, he now decided that he wanted the group members to discuss entirely different items, albeit related to the overall meeting plan, specifically future issues for the Faculty. Accordingly the categories were rearranged. The seven categories of topics from the first meeting were returned to a single category named Policy (Day 1). A new category - Future (Day 2) - was created. In addition, two other categories were created for Entertainment and Bus-Activities - it had been decided that most attendees would

travel to the retreat by bus. A final category was created to provide a communication channel for the participants to use to "talk" to the researcher.

6.3.2 Action

A computer laboratory in the Department of Information Systems was set up with the GSS software tested and running one hour before the meeting was scheduled to start. The start of the meeting was delayed by approximately thirty minutes due to the non-appearance of the invited members. It transpired that although an email message had been sent out to them several days in advance to advise them of the time and location of the meeting, none of them had received this message. The researcher visited as many of the invitees as possible, some of whom now turned out to be too busy to attend, but two extra participants were found, making a total of eight.

On this occasion there was no demonstration of the software. The convenor welcomed the participants back and explained how he wished to carry out this second phase of the process, i.e. focusing primarily on future issues for the Faculty.

After thirty minutes an error message was recorded at the researcher's terminal and further control of the team members proved impossible. However, the team members were able to continue to generate ideas and see the ideas of others. Hence the problem was temporarily ignored. After forty minutes, the input rate had slowed considerably and the participants were instructed to stop inputting ideas and comments and just to read. The vast majority of the comments generated were directed at the new category (Future Issues) as the convenor wished, with only a handful contributed to the other three categories. Table 6.2 below shows the number of ideas and comments generated per category and topic.

While the team members were reading the comments, all PCs not in use were logged in to the GSS. When this had been achieved, the researcher successfully rebooted his own PC, cleaned up the GSS user database and restarted GSS. He then informed the team members of the problems and asked them to be patient. At the same time, he initiated the transfer of data from the Categoriser tool to the evaluation tool. This took approximately five minutes as, inadvertently, not only the topics but also the comments were transferred. The length of this process clearly irritated some group members. When we did start the evaluation, using the ranking option, group members found the tool clumsy to use.

Table 6.2 Cumulative Idea and Comment Input Rates for FRPT Meeting 2

Time (mins)	0		5		10		15		20		25		30		35		40	
	I	C	I	C	I	C	I	C	I	C	I	C	I	C	I	C	I	C
Policy	21	147	21	152	21	152	21	151	21	152	21	152	21	152	21	152	21	152
Future	0	0	5	8	8	22	11	35	11	49	11	62	11	65	11	72	11	73
Entertainment	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	4	2	4	2	6	2	10	2	10	2	10
Bus Activities	0	0	1	1	3	3	3	3	3	6	5	7	5	13	5	20	5	24
Total	21	147	27	161	33	178	37	193	37	211	39	227	39	240	39	254	39	259

I = Idea; C = Comment;

The score for consensus in particular was low. After the first round of voting, some members requested to leave for other appointments and so not only was it not possible to display the vote results to all participants, but further votes were impossible. However, most participants retired to an adjacent meeting room for refreshments and to complete the debriefing questionnaire. The report was created and distributed later that evening.

6.3.3 Reflections and Lessons Learned

Some key issues emerge from this case. We realised that the rank ordering tool was most ineffective for two reasons. Firstly, it did not actually require participants to give a specific input for each item (as for example a 5-point Likert-type scale would). This meant that participants could simply submit the list of items without changing their order at all - this would defeat the purpose of the evaluation exercise. Furthermore, the team members found it very complicated to use the tool, as they had to drag the items into the order they preferred using the mouse. We suggest that if the number of items to be ranked is sufficiently few to fit on a single screen, then the method may be appropriate. However, where participants have to scroll up and down, and also drag items, then the ease of use is reduced dramatically and the chances of participants simply submitting without truly reflecting on the appropriateness of the order will be greater. However, this hypothesis is untested. In this case, there were eleven items to be ranked - more than can be accommodated on a single screen.

In future, it will be preferable to avoid this style of evaluation and to require participants to give a separate and unique score for each item, i.e. using either a Likert scale of agree-disagree or allocating a score from 1-10 for, for example, the importance of the item vis-à-vis the others. In this respect, it may be helpful to consult the users as to their preferred evaluation method. Naturally they may not be fully aware of the options available to them and the convenor may have his own preferred evaluation tool to use.

A second facilitation issue related to the time needed to transfer data from one tool to another. When, inadvertently, comments were transferred together with the ideas from the Categoriser to the Vote tool, the time lengthened dramatically. The comments were unnecessary in the evaluation process - we had already asked the participants to spend some time looking over the comments. Unfortunately, even

though the researcher may realise that he has made such a mistake, it is impossible to correct the mistake, since any action started has to be completed.

For the second consecutive session, the software itself proved unreliable - a system error occurred without warning. The researcher was careful not to undertake any unnecessary actions which might cause this, yet the errors still occurred. We can expect, therefore, that the software will crash from time to time, and so we must have a contingency plan available. This may be "ignore the problem until a suitable interval is reached" or may also include keeping a number of PCs ready to use at short notice, i.e. each participant has two PCs - one to use and one spare in case the software crashes.

Since the software malfunctioned on both occasions, it was expected that the team members would be annoyed. Although they did not question the security of the data (and in fact no data was lost at any time), they did feel that the software instability was a cause for concern. This concern was strongly shared by the convenor and also the researcher. The errors that we observed were reported to Ventana Corporation - the software developers - and solutions sought.

Where meeting process issues were concerned, we note that there are a number of changes (improvements) between the first and second meetings of the FRPT. These can be seen in Table 6.3 below, but it is noted that in only one case - item D2 - was the improvement *statistically* significant. Viewing this from a purely statistical point of view might be disappointing, but the questionnaire has a much more important function - to elicit meeting process problems and thereby guide the facilitation process of subsequent meetings. This form of information is invaluable for our reflections on the meeting processes. It is pleasing to note that so many process items register improvements, irrespective of the significance. Indeed, in many cases it would be impossible for a statistically significant improvement to be made.

To use an example, item C1 "The language of the meeting prevented you from participating" scored 4.67 at the first meeting and 4.78 at the second meeting. Even if it had scored 5.00 (strongly disagree) at the second meeting, this would not have made the improvement statistically *significant*, yet both scores indicate that language difficulties did not occur during the meeting - a not *insignificant* piece of information. On this basis, a measure of success can be realised in the fact that improvements were made for all items except team work (Members worked together as a team) where a slight drop was recorded and a couple of other items where

marginal deteriorations were recorded. Of particular importance is the fact that the technology was perceived as both comfortable and facilitating participation. Although most questionnaire items recorded improvements, some of those items remained a cause for concern at the end of the second meeting (scoring above two or below four, as appropriate to the scale), viz.:

- You feel that you played a useful role
- Discussions were meaningful / meaningless
- Discussions were imaginative / unimaginative
- Other members appeared willing to answer questions when asked
- Members worked together as a team
- Members had sufficient access to the information they needed so as to participate actively in and fully understand the meeting
- The time spent in the meeting was efficiently used
- Issues raised in the meeting were discussed thoroughly
- To what extent would you say that this meeting was result oriented?
- How would you rate your overall level of satisfaction with the meeting?
- To what extent was consensus achieved in the meeting?
- What percentage of meeting time do you think was spent on serious discussion?

Table 6.3 Questions, Scales, Mean Scores and Significance Levels from FRPT Meetings 1 and 2

Question	Var.	Scales	Meet 1	Meet 2	sig %
The language of the meeting prevented your participation	C1	1 Strongly Agree; 5 Strongly Disagree	4.67	4.78	.665
You found it hard to understand others	C2	1 Strongly Agree; 5 Strongly Disagree	4.33	4.44	.779
You experienced problems expressing yourself	C3	1 Strongly Agree; 5 Strongly Disagree	4.33	4.22	.774
You were reluctant to put forward ideas	C4	1 Strongly Agree; 5 Strongly Disagree	4.33	4.44	.725
The discussion was meaningful or meaningless	D1	1 Very Meaningful; 5 Very Meaningless	2.58	2.22	.284
The discussion was appropriate or inappropriate	D2	1 Very Appropriate; 5 Very Inappropriate	2.75	2.00	.032
The discussion was open or closed	D3	1 Very Open; 5 Very Closed	2.00	1.44	.162
The discussion was imaginative or unimaginative	D4	1 Very Imaginative; 5 Very Unimaginative	2.83	2.44	.315
To what extent was the meeting result oriented?	E1	1 Strongly Result Oriented; 5 Weakly RO	2.75	2.44	.437
The time in the meeting was used efficiently	E2	1 Strongly Agree; 5 Strongly Disagree	2.58	2.66	.884
The issues in the meeting were discussed thoroughly	E3	1 Strongly Agree; 5 Strongly Disagree	3.67	3.33	.515
What percentage of time was devoted to serious discussion?	E4	0% - 100%	37.42	46.67	.469
Some group members tried to intimidate others	S1	1 Strongly Agree; 5 Strongly Disagree	4.5	4.67	.625
Some group members tried to influence others	S2	1 Strongly Agree; 5 Strongly Disagree	4.67	4.67	1.00
You felt inhibited from participating due to the behaviour of other group members	S3	1 Strongly Agree; 5 Strongly Disagree	4.75	4.67	.777
You experienced pressure to conform to a viewpoint	S4	1 Strongly Agree; 5 Strongly Disagree	4.42	4.78	.280
Other members appeared willing to answer questions	T1	1 Strongly Agree; 5 Strongly Disagree	2.75	2.33	.431
Members worked together as a team	T2	1 Strongly Agree; 5 Strongly Disagree	2.92	3.22	.602
Members had sufficient access to the information they needed so as to participate in the meeting	T3	1 Strongly Agree; 5 Strongly Disagree	2.67	2.33	.400
You felt that you played a useful role in the meeting	CR1	1 Strongly Agree; 5 Strongly Disagree	3.17	2.44	.126
How would you rate your overall satisfaction?	CR2	1 Strongly Satisfied; 5 Strongly Dissatisfied	2.67	2.22	.316
To what extent was consensus achieved in the meeting?	CR3	1 Strongly Achieved; 5 Weakly Achieved	3.58	3.22	.440
How comfortable did you feel using the technology?	Tech1	1 Very Comfortable; 5 Very Uncomfortable	2.08	1.56	.196
To what extent did the technology hinder or facilitate your participation?	Tech2	1 Strongly Hindered; 5 Strongly Facilitated	4.00	4.22	.642

It is significant that neither status related issues or communication issues were ever perceived as being a problem. Where discussion quality was concerned, there were some minor problems - analysis of the data indicates that items D1 and D4 scored 2.22 and 2.44 respectively, i.e. only slightly agree that the discussions were appropriate/meaningful. Where teamwork and efficiency are concerned, however, all items of both constructs received poor scores - at best slightly positive, at worst rather negative. Thus although the percentage of meeting time spent on serious discussion improved from 37.42% to 46.67%, this latter figure is still low - more than half the time in the meeting is perceived as doing something other than useful discussion. Teamwork similarly scores poorly - there seems not to be a strong sense of team-related activity. Had this group held further meetings, it would have been necessary to focus on these two areas in particular (teamwork and efficiency), in order to make further improvements in the meeting process. Such improvements might be incremental and statistically insignificant, but improvements would be desirable nonetheless.

6.4 Conclusions

In this case, two meetings were held with the members of a team formed for the express purpose of generating topics for a forthcoming faculty retreat. The GSS software was employed for this purpose and broadly the aims and objectives of the team were achieved. In addition, the two planning sessions together with the data collected from the questionnaire and the face-to-face interviews with team members provided very valuable material for the researcher in terms of improving the action research facilitation style. The lessons learned are invaluable in many ways, including: the idiosyncrasies of the software and the crisis management that is necessary to cope with these; the application of the instrument developed in Chapter Four to cases and the analysis of the data collected from those meetings; the development of the researcher's role vis-à-vis the participants in the meeting and his interpretation of the available information for the purpose of improving the meeting processes. It is certainly true that the meeting processes were far from perfect - both due to imperfections in the software and the facilitation techniques employed. Overall, however, the convenor pronounced himself satisfied with the outputs of these two meetings and with the potential usefulness of this type of software for such

idea generating tasks. Although concerned about the software performance, he believed that on balance the negative effects were insignificant considering the benefits achieved. To accomplish so much within the same time in a traditional face-to-face context would be impossible - we must bear in mind that only a total of seventy minutes was used for the actual idea generation activities. An outcome measure of the FRPT's success lies in the fact that most of the topics selected by the team were subsequently used at the faculty retreat and were written up into reports describing that event.

6.5 The Value of the Two Pilot Cases

In Chapter Three, we described how action research was believed to be an appropriate methodology for tackling our research question and attempting to achieve our research objectives. In Chapters Five and Six, we have described two pilot cases where we applied and tested the appropriateness of the operationalisation. These two pilot cases have been simple and short, yet also educational for the researcher, who has had the opportunity to experience how the planned operationalisation works in practice. They also confirm the need for the use of an interpretative research methodology - action research - in order to understand and improve the meetings that we facilitate. In the following two chapters we describe two more cases that are substantially longer and more complex, using the same methodology.