

The Untapped Potential of Visual Facilitation

Last November, we organized a [Visual Mapping Challenge](#) as a way to better understand and explore the power of the different visual mapping techniques we used in our work. The San Francisco Planning Department was a willing guinea pig, and we invited many colleagues and friends to participate as well.

One of those friends was Jessica Ausinheiler of [Monitor Institute](#) (now part of Monitor-Deloitte), who graciously contributed these thoughts inspired by her experiences from that day. The bulk of her work with Monitor Institute revolves around facilitating multi-stakeholder engagements and communities of practice, using systems thinking to help institutions better understand the complex social context in which they operate, and designing longer strategic planning processes. You can follow her on Twitter at [@jessausinheiler](#).

As a strategy consultant at Monitor-Deloitte, I regularly work with our in-house graphic recorder [Lynn Carruthers](#). Our relationship is routine: The project team develops the convening (or workshop) design, we run the design by Lynn when it's nearly complete, and Lynn visually records conversations the day of the convening. Lynn is our amazingly creative note taker.

Given this experience, I'd come to Groupaya's Visual Challenge with a certain expectation for what their guest graphic recorder, [Mariah Howard](#), would do... and was blown away by how much more she was able to accomplish when allowed to go beyond her usual role of creative note taker.

Mariah turned out to be a skilled facilitator who used a rich toolkit of visual exercises to prompt participants to think

more creatively, empowered them to synthesize their own conversations by creating a visual poster (versus engaging in painful verbal report-outs), and making the whole process very fun.

Untapped Potential

I was so intrigued by what I saw at Groupaya's Visual Challenge that I decided to have a follow up discussion with both Lynn and Mariah about the gap between their typical engagements and their untapped potential. Here's some of what I learned:

- Lynn and Mariah consider themselves “visual practitioners”: professionals who use visual tools to capture ideas and facilitate conversation. There are many other terms to describe what they do, e.g., “visual mapping,” “graphic recording,” and “visual recording.” Their roles encompass a broad spectrum of activities, ranging from creating illustrations in a studio to live graphic recording to facilitating targeted conversations (see diagram below). Despite this, it's been very **difficult for them to “turn around” and move beyond the role of the graphic recorder.**



Illustration

Creating a visual product based on dialog with the client; neither space nor team specific

Visual or graphic recording

Visually capturing a conversation; creating a keepsake of a moment

Visual facilitation

Utilizing a rich visual toolkit to help participants reach a set goal; involves visual skill building for participants

- **Project teams should more often ask: “Are we using graphic recording as an intentional part of the process, or because we’re accustomed to having a graphic recorder**

in the background?” In Mariah’s words, “In my finer moments, I make graphics that are useful for the people in the conversation I’m recording as well as to a wider audience. It’s been pretty soul crushing that so many recordings are never used after a meeting ends—that the maps don’t fully support participants or anyone else.”

- Visual practitioners can do more than just produce visuals or creatively capture a conversation; they have the **potential to help us think differently** because they are visual (vs. verbal or written). As systems thinker Rosalind Armon indicates in her book [*Growing Wings Along the Way*](#) (2011), words may inhibit our ability to spot patterns whereas pictures may enable us to not only spot those patterns but also begin to describe ideas that cannot yet be articulated in words.

Implications for Practitioners

In the course of my conversation with Lynn and Mariah, the three of us started thinking about what we could do differently to more fully tap into the untapped potential of visual facilitation.

- Engage the visual practitioner early in the convening design process. He or she may have been part of through thousands of convenings and will likely have valuable suggestions about the design.
- Think about the benefits that visual exercises may add to your convening, particularly in exploratory phases of the project. For example, Mariah opened her session at Groupaya’s Visual Challenge by asking San Francisco Planning Department employees to draw the department’s “superpower” as a way to jump start a conversation about how they could make civic participation in city planning more fun.

How open would your client be to incorporating self-recording activities in which participants get to draw

their feelings and ideas and co-create visual stories?

- Consider asking the visual practitioner to lead a group dialog session using graphics as a way for the group to reflect on what they are learning.
- As part of the design process, think of ways to use the products of a visually recorded or facilitated session, e.g., bring the map into the room for your team's next meeting and reflect on what you've learned since the event.
- Consider training your consultants in visual facilitation techniques as a way to make them more effective facilitators. You could start by giving them David Sibbet's book [*Visual Meetings*](#) (2010) to jump-start this training.

Groupaya's Visual Challenge and the intentional thinking and conversation it spurred made me even more aware of the value of visual thinking and communication in group settings. It reminded me of a shift described by Tim Brown in his 2009 book *Change by Design*: from "Design" as done by designers to "design thinking" as done by everyman or woman.

Could something similar happen in the field of visual facilitation – i.e., a shift from visual facilitation as done exclusively by visual practitioners to some form of visual facilitation (e.g., having visual report outs) as done by everyman or woman consultant or project leaders? And if so, what are the implications for the way visual practitioners and other consultants interact with one another?

The Bottom Line

We need to transform the our relationship with "graphic recorders" such that these visual practitioners are more fully welcome to participate and bring their skill sets into the design, facilitation, and full utilization of the materials they help to produce. In Lynn's words, "We need to work together to help us move our convenings from 'routine' to

'remarkable.'"