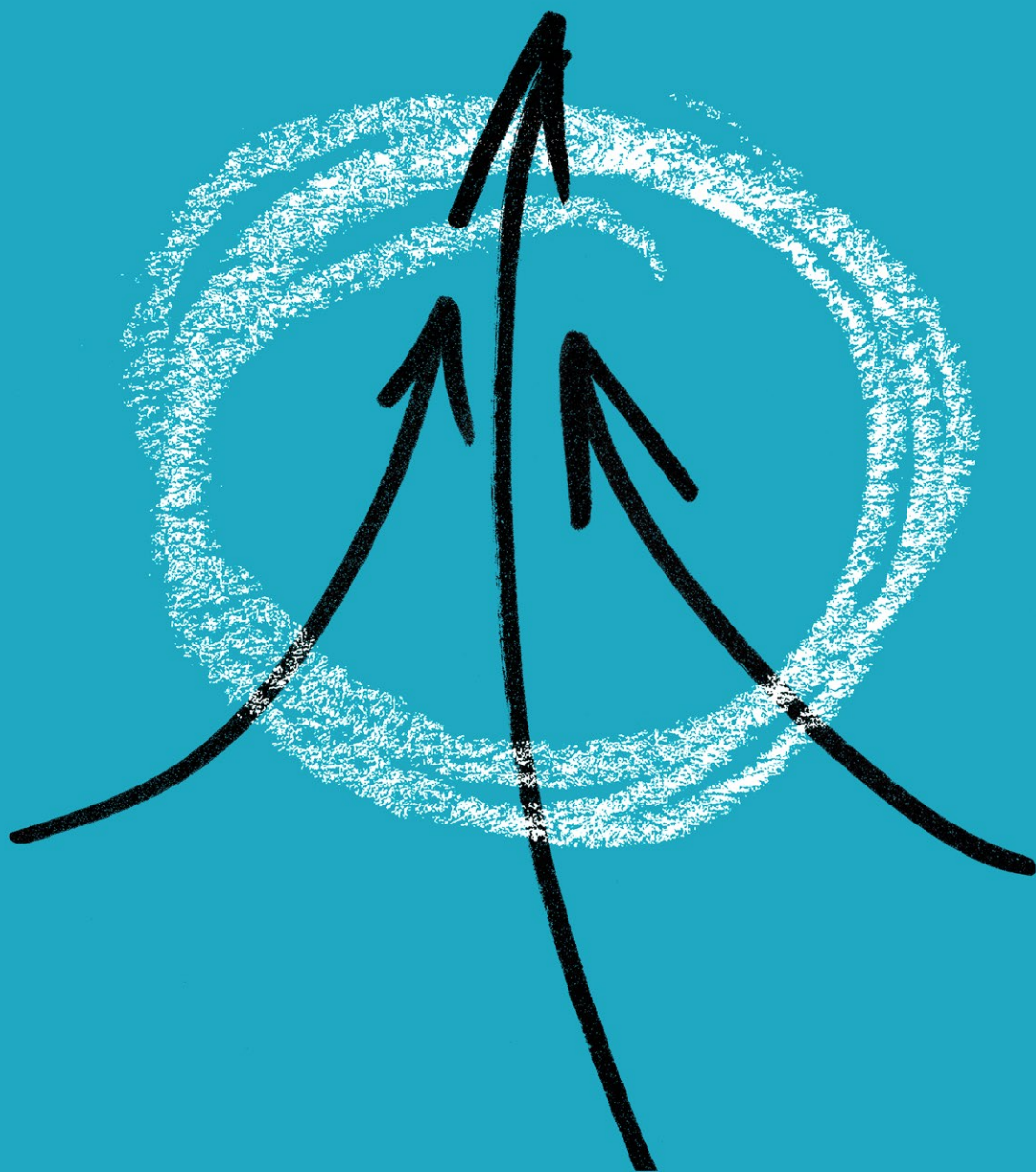


Drawn Together Through **VISUAL PRACTICE**

An Anthology Edited by
Brandy Agerbeck, Kelvy Bird, Sam Bradd & Jennifer Shepherd





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This anthology contains exciting and varied contributions to the growing literature on visual language and its power to “draw us” together. The authors offer a wide range of experience, powerful illustrations and the core message that visual language enables us to learn, think, and grow in new ways – especially when considering the complex relationships that words alone can’t illuminate. *Drawn Together through Visual Practice* reflects the power of this field to help transform organizations and communities in life-affirming ways.

– Juanita Brown PhD, Co-Founder, *The World Cafe*

After 45 years of drawing on the wall it is extraordinary to see this field bloom in such rich and contributive ways. The authors are the cambium layer—advancing and shaping it with practice and questions—providing inspiration for all of us who are living into this emergent, hopeful, phenomenon.

– David Sibbet, *The Grove Consultants International*

The field of visual practice has long been nurtured by the quiet presence of artists devoted to listening and serving the groups with whom they work. It is high time that they turned and faced the room and shared the depth of artisanal practice and craft that underscores their devotion to the work. This collection is a stunning revelation of the heart of this practice. Whatever your role in group work, you will be made better by listening to these voices and stories of experience, sensitivity and careful attention.

– Chris Corrigan, *Art of Hosting and Harvest Moon Consulting*

A first-rate look at the new world of visual practice. I know from personal experience that capturing content and discussion in real time imagery can help create communal understanding and memory. The images give participants a shared visual vocabulary that help capture complex ideas and enable the move to new discoveries and innovations. The book is a delightful dive into understanding the background and development of this new teaching/art form. Enjoy.

– Deborah Ancona, *Seley Distinguished Professor of Management, Faculty Director of the MIT Leadership Center, MIT Sloan School of Management*

I've seen visual practice map ideas, refresh memories, and provoke insights in many meetings involving dozens of professionals from business, government, and education. So it's a special delight to discover this collection representing the art, craft, and inspiration of visual practice from multiple perspectives.

– David N. Perkins, Carl H. Pforzheimer, Jr., *Research Professor of Teaching and Learning, Harvard Graduate School of Education*

Graphic facilitation is a powerful way for a group to come to know themselves and the work they want to do together. It is no wonder that it so quickly became a part of any good meeting, conference, or problem solving session! *Drawn Together* is a valuable book, timely and well thought through. It should be read and employed by all wanting to improve and accelerate the rate of change and innovation within an organization, executive team or community. The more diversity in the room, the more powerful visual imagery becomes.

– Gail Taylor, *Co-Founder of MG Taylor, Inc., Founder of Tomorrow Makers, Inc.*

At last! A compendium of stories, helpful approaches and mind sets that reflects the diversity, the richness of scope and the broad impact of the growing field of visual practice/visual language. Our visual practice not only encompasses 'making the invisible visible' and 'making the visible visual' through many artistic means, but also, it incorporates all the human elements of working together, listening, and inclusion that our world is crying for. The potential is unlimited. This is a must read for people who are looking for ways to make substantial change and impact in our world as a group or as an individual and who are looking for paths to go 'from my way to our way'.

– Susan Kelly, *Visual Practitioner*

Drawn Together offers me tools to reflect and improve on developing campaigns for Lush, and encourages personal reflection on my process. A tremendous job bringing together a picture of the evolving work and sharing best practices.

– Carleen Pickard, *Ethical Campaigns Specialist, Lush Handmade Cosmetics, North America*

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The Visual Now

An introduction

We find ourselves in an age of unprecedented complexity, with increased globalization and access to information, while boundaries all around us dissolve. Visual practice helps make sense of this changing landscape by shifting our relationship to self, other, and society. Drawings give shape to our ideas, provide sharing of methodology, and reframe what is possible.

Visual practice makes the fleeting and ephemeral nature of spoken conversation concrete. Drawings can take infinite form: brushstrokes expressing gesture, metaphors that offer common ground, maps to guide a system, and devices for reconciliation. Individuals and groups alike make these meaningful marks. Communities of thousands can access key content through the aid of images. We see our thoughts from new perspectives through visual interpretation, and we relate with fresh eyes to ourselves and others.

Visuals draw us together. They allow us to consider where we have been, who we are, and who we want to be in the future. We mark these transitions through the acts and artifacts of drawing.

Visual practice is a rich and diverse field. This anthology connects ideas and practitioners at a moment when our practice is dramatically expanding. Let's pause and survey the field to date: What work is being done? What questions currently guide us? Which theories inform us? Who do we serve, and what is the impact of our craft? What do we learn from our individual experience? And how do we contribute back to the greater field? **Now is the moment to embrace visual thinking, practice, and facilitation as a defining technology of our time.**

This anthology brings 27 voices together to paint a broad picture of our evolving work and the audiences we serve.

Our imagery generates meaning and shared understanding. It opens possibility, fosters discovery, and facilitates change. For example, educators share an art-based inquiry for children and a curriculum for first-year college students. Improvisation shows up in sketchnoting and through dance. A filmmaker describes how storytelling strengthens listening. Mark-makers trace early use of graffiti and calligraphy as seeds for their current work. Climate justice, personal planning for people with disabilities, conflict resolution, and cross-cultural communication all employ visuals for societal transformation.

We also explore the development of new tools and methodologies, such as photo cards and visual dictionaries, sharing the invention and process behind products geared to facilitate.

Skilled non-visual facilitators share insights on forming strong partnerships for seamless collaborations. Articles on harvesting and organizational development convey integrated, holistic applications of visuals within change initiatives. Kinesthetic modeling and art therapy demonstrate practices which move beyond verbal language. And a research-based review names the mindsets needed to re-envision our ways of working.

As editors, we also bring our diverse experiences to this picture. Brandy Agerbeck's article "Making Room for Making" shares best practices as we lead others to draw together. In "Steady, to Scale," Kelvy Bird turns our attention to the role of "containers" in how we hold ourselves and the spaces we support. In Jennifer Shepherd's "Discovering Wisdom Within and Between," we examine how storyboards, portraits, and visual explanations can help us tap into our existing inner wisdom to

solve the problems of our time. Building on his experience working cross-culturally with Indigenous communities, Sam Bradd shares tools and observations for building cultural safety. And in the final chapter, Jennifer and Sam collaborate on a series of questions to guide practitioners in reflective inquiry.

How we were drawn towards this anthology

Visual practitioners frequently travel from event to event, and it's no surprise that the genesis of this book logged many air miles, too. It started in July 2013 when Sam (Vancouver, Canada) and Jennifer (Ottawa, Canada) shared a cab to the airport after an International Forum of Visual Practitioners (IFVP) conference in New York City. The ride provided just enough time to discover mutual interests in adult education theory, and within six months the two had hosted an international, online conversation series.

Powerful questions are contagious and lead to more questions. Attending EuViz in Berlin the following summer, Sam and Brandy (Chicago, USA) wished aloud that more colleagues would share their experiences and expertise in writing. Then at the 2015 IFVP conference in Austin, Sam invited Brandy and Kelvy (Cambridge, USA) to further dive into this exploration. Through these connected conversations, an anthology was born.

From four home cities we sought geographic diversity and reached out to visual practitioners around the world. Though we know no single book is ever complete, we hope this volume shares some perspectives with which you already resonate and opens alternative lenses.

We also hope these pages inspire new drawings, new methods, new connections, new conversations, and new writings on our practice. As editors, contributors, and readers alike, we all take part in shaping our visual future. More than ever, visual practice has a power to shift what we see, how we think, the stories we tell, and what becomes possible for us to create in the world.

The editors,

Brandy Agerbeck, Kelvy Bird, Sam Bradd, Jennifer Shepherd

Discovering Wisdom Within and Between

How storyboards, portraits, and visual explanations can help us learn to solve the puzzles of our time

Jennifer Shepherd

All around the world, everyday leaders like us are working on ideas and projects we care about to address the most pressing and complex problems of our time. Respond to global warming. Improve population health. Create welcoming communities. Preserve the local watershed. While we may address different topics, we share one thing in common: a learning opportunity.

It is this: to learn to surface the wisdom hiding within us and between us and connect it with what we already know. By making the invisible visible, we can express, touch, and otherwise explore ideas and relationships until we discover the missing links in our understanding and wisely choose what to do next. This step could be to form or deepen relationships with others, to coordinate or harmonize our actions, or—like a jigsaw puzzle—to join pieces of information into a cohesive picture of the whole.

Expert navigators use instruments, maps, or other points of reference to plan and follow a path and arrive at their chosen destination. They rely on cues and information from others to see what they can't see from their perspective and add it to what they know about their current nautical position. By combining what they know with what others know, they can find their way.

We do that too. As we work to solve the puzzles of our time, we constantly navigate relationships with ourselves, others, our environment, and ideas—learning as we go. Sometimes our destination is clear to us, and we rely on each other to get there. At other times, we're steadfast in our determination to take a different approach. We have no idea where our actions will take us or what consequences await. In either case, when the winds are still, we're enveloped in fog, and our communication systems are down, what are we to do? Learn to see the wisdom hiding within and between us.

Often, we can't access this wisdom on our own. It may be explicit, tacit, or not yet formed and we don't know what we don't know. We may not even know it exists until we start to explore with others what we know about ourselves, each other, and our work. Given that we come to the work with different backgrounds and perspectives, we can offer space to each other to sit in "I don't know" and discover and learn together.

One approach is to create a storyboard, portrait, or visual explanation with others. These new images act like containers with three core functions:

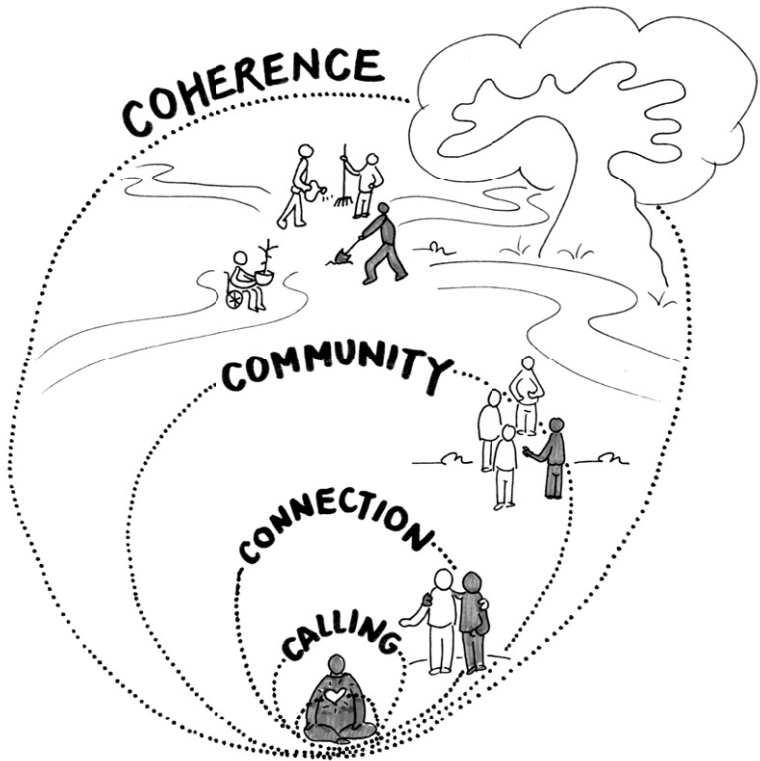
1. to hold and organize what we know
2. to identify what we don't know
3. to draw out (literally and figuratively) ideas and concepts that help us make sense of the complex problem, the shared work to be done, and our place in it

Everyday leaders often share stories with me about their struggles working on simple, complex, and complicated problems. As part of my visual engagement practice, I've used a variety of co-creative processes to help clients, colleagues, and community members access hidden wisdom. Starting from a blank page, I ask questions to evoke stories, use these stories to unearth buried treasures, and invite intuition to guide us. As the visually descriptive objects take shape, something transforms within

these leaders: they are no longer confused and they understand their topics differently. Their struggles dissipate and they deepen connections with themselves, others, and the world around them. Their inner awakening is also made visible and tangible; the leaders feel relaxed, energized, or empowered to make their next move.

I've discovered several patterns by following this approach. The stories I hear often reveal that everyday leaders are thirsty for clarity in at least one of four areas:

1. **Calling:** Who am I? What is my work to do?
2. **Connection:** Who are we? What do we wish to create in this relationship?
3. **Community:** What is my role within the whole? Where do I belong and what is my contribution?
4. **Coherence:** What are we together? How does our work across difference serve the greater good that grows and nourishes life?



I offer the following three stories to illustrate these points and suggest why making storyboards, portraits, and visual explanations with others can help. For the purpose of this chapter, I've created my own definitions to describe these visually descriptive objects:

- **A storyboard** contains a narrative of a journey over time, or contrasts the present with the future.
- **A portrait** depicts someone or something in a particular way. It represents this person or thing at one moment in time through the lens of one or multiple perspectives.
- **A visual explanation** helps an audience to understand a complicated or complex concept. It reveals relationships among ideas that are easier to grasp visually than through the written or spoken word alone.

How storyboards clarified calling and strengthened connections

When we first met, my client “Jane” told me she felt anxious and nervous and didn’t know what she was doing. Her plentiful ideas and energy were all over the place and she felt pulled in different directions at once. The opportunities she faced to expand her business, relocate, and strengthen relationships with family were overwhelming. Jane and her partner had been struggling for months to make decisions that would affect them both and they were frustrated with talking in circles. Their stress was also growing with the added pressure of looming deadlines.

Jane and I created two storyboards: one of Jane’s calling and another of Jane’s personal and professional vision. Jane wanted to help girls and young women to make a shift in their lives through the medium of dance. I asked Jane questions, listened for the essential ideas and details that Jane cared about, and began to illustrate these ideas on a large sheet of paper using proximity, color, and lines to show how they were related. As the storyboards took shape, Jane’s concept of “Who am I?” and “What is my work to do?” began to make sense to her.

In our third meeting, Jane reflected on her inventory of competing demands for time and energy. Looking at the storyboards we created, Jane was able to confidently and quickly sort out for herself what she wanted to do and instinctively let go of the things that didn’t fit with her idea of a beautiful life. Within a week of our final conversation, Jane

informed me that she and her partner had made important decisions and started to plan for their future. Why did the storyboards work?

First, the process of creating the storyboards helped Jane to access her inner wisdom by making the invisible visible. Jane connected with her own intuition and could see how the parts of her life she had been treating separately—her calling, her work, her family life, and her own interests—came together into a whole. Instead of reacting to outside stimuli pulling her in different directions, Jane could easily choose what to do, guided by her clear connection with personal purpose—her inner beacon.

Second, the conversation helped Jane to interact with the storyboard as it developed. This helped her to generate insights and transform how she felt inside. Now feeling grounded, happy and peaceful, and literally seeing what mattered to her, Jane could clearly choose what to do.

Third, Jane had something tangible to show to her partner. This shared point of reference helped them to identify what mattered to them both and discover what they wanted to create in life together.

How portraits clarified community connections

In a second instance, I was approached by a funding agency to create two portraits over the course of a two-day meeting. The first would depict the perspectives shared by invited staff, volunteers, donors, and grantees on how to fund for community impact. The second would capture the board members' reflections on the topic as they contemplated a strategic change of direction for the organization. They took stock of their purpose, promise, and history, reviewed priority goals, identified considerations for focused giving, and identified implications of shifting to contributor-centric engagement.

After the gathering, staff members who were not part of the process were asked to look at the portraits. Turning to a senior leader, I heard "John" say: "I get it. I can see what I need to do now. I don't need to wait weeks for your written report of the meeting or the executive summary." The portraits made immediate sense to him and he felt inspired to take action right away. Why did the portraits work?

First, the portraits made the multiple perspectives visible to John and tied the shared wisdom together. Comparing the depiction of others' ideas with his own enabled John to instantly make sense of the new direction.

Second, the portraits helped John to connect with what he cared about: Where are we going together? How do I fit into this work? Where do I belong, and what's my contribution?

Third, referring to the tangible object enabled John to give voice to his own work and talk about it with his colleagues. Presumably, these conversations—supported by a visually descriptive point of reference—helped the agency's staff as a whole to see how their work in different departments was related to funding for community impact and to coordinate their actions going forward.

How a visual explanation clarified the coherence of a proposed project

A third client approached me with a different problem. Her organization had collaborated with successful businesses, non-profit agencies, and government partners to develop a viable model to address a complicated issue: how can we source and purchase more healthy food in the face of rising demand and rising food and fuel costs so that our neighbors in need have access to healthy food? The puzzle "Francine" was working on was complex and the response was complicated.

Francine needed a visual explanation to tackle two issues. First, she had spent years developing trust and relationships with partners to understand what was needed and design a systems approach to meet the needs. She was too close to see what someone on the "outside" saw and what they needed to understand to support the initiative. Second, to win a start-up grant in a funding competition, Francine needed to quickly explain the business model to potential funders so they could easily grasp what the new enterprise would do and where it would create value within the local food system.

Being new to food system issues, I spent over two days reviewing documents in piecemeal and engaging in several long conversations and concept development sessions with Francine to uncover the salient points to communicate in the visual explanation. Many related storylines began to surface as we explored: what's really at the heart of the problem, supports and assets, the pain points in the system, and how the new enterprise can relieve the pain or create new gains. We also explored how the various organizations in the food system are related,

what relationships are missing, and where and when the money will be invested and why it is needed. We sketched and re-sketched concepts. We shuffled and re-shuffled a plethora of sticky notes. We talked, listened, asked questions, and challenged each other with a refreshing intensity until the mess of ideas gelled into a cohesive whole. We pared down the details to the bare essence and illustrated the flow of work and value.

Creating the visual explanation with me helped Francine to achieve her two goals. By clarifying her thinking along the way, she improved her ability to present her ideas coherently. She found the simple language she needed to explain a complex topic after seeing and hearing me explain how I saw and understood the problem and noticed what really wasn't clear to me as an outsider. Francine transformed her complicated proposal that made sense to those on the inside of the project into a clear and concise funding request that made sense to everyone. As an added benefit, she came to understand the food insecurity problem better, even after years of dedicated focus on it.

And although another organization ultimately won the grant, feedback on Francine's presentation was positive. Other funders in the audience saw the value in the project and wanted to support it. In fact, three different funders in the audience funded the project within three months of the presentation! Another leader, who had been hearing about the problem and the proposed business model before, told me this was the clearest he had ever understood the problem and the project. Why did the visual explanation work?

Let's peer through the Johari Window, a model developed in 1955 by Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham, to explore this together. Francine knew what she knew, but she didn't know what others didn't know. Our conversations helped us to create a new, shared understanding of the problem and express it in a way that neither of us could have done without tapping into each other's knowledge, ignorance, and perspective. We explored *blind spots* that revealed what the other person knew but we didn't know ourselves, *hidden areas* that revealed what we knew but the other person didn't, and we made these invisible areas of knowledge visible to complete the picture of what we both knew. From this new place of shared understanding, we were able to clearly articulate Francine's social enterprise concept to improve others' understanding

of how the various people, organizations, actions, and ideas involved fit together in a coherent whole to respond to the food insecurity puzzle.

What do we do when knowledge doesn't yet exist?

Storyboards, portraits, and visual explanations excel at helping everyday leaders to access, organize, and illustrate what is known to help us make sense of the puzzles we wish to solve and see opportunities to coordinate action with others. As I walk my own path in this learning journey with you, I wonder: What is their role when knowledge doesn't yet exist? How can they help us to sit in the great unknown and work across purposes, not at cross-purposes, to bridge the boundaries of relationship, purpose, or knowledge that divide us?

Answer: to focus our attention on learning *how* to work together. As we develop storyboards, portraits, and visual explanations collaboratively, we can use the visually creative process:

1. to nourish deeper conversations with each other and listen with empathy and compassion;
2. to change the object of focus;
3. to question existing practices; and
4. to develop new practices and models that shift our approach to solve the puzzles we care about.

My thinking on this topic has been deeply inspired by the work of Yrjö Engeström (2001). In applying the five core principles of activity theory, he introduced a new approach to expansive learning by exploring why, how, and what we learn as we work inter-organizationally on a common problem.

Take, for example, the complex problem of remediating the health of Muskrat Lake in Ontario, Canada. Those of us who are working on this puzzle are not well connected with the other leaders, networks, and organizations who also care. It's not clear who is ultimately responsible for stewarding this care or the lake's health for the greater good. And despite good intentions, in the absence of these relationships and a process for coordinating our actions, we don't have the means or capacity to inform others about what we notice, plan, and do. The lake is dying and its ecosystem will carry the burden until those of us who care enough or depend on it learn to solve this puzzle collectively.

Moreover, though we all depend on the lake's health, we may not all know about or respect how our different interests are interdependent. Some people want to drink the water, eat the fish, and swim in the lake. Others wish to earn a living, produce food, maintain property values and shoreline use, permit new development, and enjoy recreation and tourism assets. Still others wish to preserve habitat for flora and fauna, assess and monitor the lake's health, and better conditions in the watershed as a whole.

As we gather facts about the lake and debate what's making it sick and who's to blame, we can create portraits that show us mired down in our separateness and reinforce the divisive boundaries of what we currently know and understand. Alternatively, we can use the visually creative process to *listen to each other with empathy and give voice to and make room for our multiple perspectives*. A portrait developed in this way can reveal what connects us and help us choose to take shared responsibility for communal stewardship.

As we open ourselves to see the lake's health *through multiple viewpoints and through the context of history*, we begin to create shared understanding of the lake's situation and the conditions that create lake health. Instead of focusing on what divides us, we can now *focus our attention on what unites us*: learning what will make the lake healthy. When we ask what each other knows and sees, we make our respective blind spots and hidden areas of knowing visible. In the process of creating a visual explanation of what is making the lake sick, we deepen our knowledge of interconnected dynamics and begin to reflect on our own contribution to the lake's impending demise. As our shared understanding of the situation grows, we can begin to *question existing practices*—including our own.

Armed with two tangible points of reference about our shared purpose, we're now well primed to *notice and map contradictions* between current practices and conditions that create lake health. The act of identifying and noticing such contradictions inspires us to change and drives us to develop different ways of being and acting. Now we can create a storyboard that reveals tensions between current practices and the vision for lake health. By exploring these tensions, we begin to *identify and make sense of entry points for change*.

Others have written about the power of visual practice to nourish innovation and design prototypes, so I won't say more about that here. We know that visualization helps us to look at and see situations from different perspectives, imagine what is possible, and show and share our ideas with others. Images we create through such processes can help us to reflect on and realign practices and consolidate what works.

In summary, we can turn to storyboards, portraits, and visual explanations to gain clarity about our purpose, our relationships with one another, our communities, and the complex problem of lake health remediation. We can also use the visually creative process to help us learn how to be in this work together.

Opening to the power of not knowing

As we work with others on complex problems, it is helpful to explore our learning stance. When making visually descriptive objects like storyboards, portraits, and visual explanations, we are called to be with our vulnerability and open to the power of not knowing. We need to attend to what we are sensing in our body—not just what we are thinking—to begin to see and touch the essence of wisdom awaiting birth.

Have you ever been part of a gathering and had a feeling that something “big” is developing in the room but you can't quite put your finger on it? Staying with that energy, following it, and inviting it to speak through you is part of the process. The images we draw—or that others draw for us—can be messy because we're just starting to get a sense of what is emerging. When we allow that messiness to be as it is without judgment, we create space for new, shared wisdom to grow in the space between us and discover what we can learn from it collectively.

In these times, we are *all* called to be visual practitioners—whether we hold the pen or not. Through our presence and attention to what we notice arising inside and between us, we form an energetic container to hold the essence of wisdom as it begins to emerge. We must open to it, voice it, and begin to give it just enough form that we can work with it and come to understand it together. Co-created messy drawings are good examples of “form”; they show ideas in development and help us to see the big picture of our shared work and make sense of what is ours to do.

Conclusion

As everyday leaders, we are on a learning journey to solve the complex puzzles of our time. When our path or destination is not clear, we can surface the hidden wisdom within and between us to quench our thirst for clarity and understanding. We do this by creating visually descriptive storyboards, portraits, and explanations with others. These objects reveal patterns in what we collectively know and don't know. They become a shared point of reference as we explore: our calling, personal connections, community relations, and next steps to take with coherence of identity and purpose. We live in a relational world. By working with others to make the invisible visible, we can navigate through unknown waters and find our way.

JENNIFER SHEPHERD makes it easy for everyday leaders to clarify what matters, discover new possibilities, and intuitively make their next move. She believes individuals, organizations, and communities can achieve great things when they tap into the latent wisdom within and between them. Jennifer inspires leaders like you to access this wisdom and use it to generate insight and collaborate well. Jennifer is the Principal of Living Tapestries, a consulting practice based in Ottawa, Canada. She holds a Master of Arts in Human Systems Intervention and is an IAF Certified Professional Facilitator. www.livingtapestries.ca Copyright © 2016

Reference

Engeström, Yrjö. (2001). "Expansive Learning at Work: toward an activity theoretical reconceptualization." *Journal of Education and Work*, Vol. 14, No. 1.



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– **DAVID N. PERKINS**, HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Drawings give shape to our ideas and reframe what is possible.

This anthology gives voice to the field of visual thinking as the range of its practice dramatically expands. Curious observers, bold beginners, and expert facilitators alike can now come together to:

- Share cross-disciplinary and regional perspectives
- Surface and approach the complex puzzles of our time
- Reflect on core human connection and communication

Leaders in facilitation, conflict mediation, education – and all other areas using visual processes to establish common ground – will find an unparalleled wisdom of experience in these pages.

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