

**Visual Tools in Facilitation  
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**Introduction**

Our work at RCLA often requires the facilitation of difficult conversations, building connections among diverse groups of people, and/or convening leaders concerned with critical social issues to problem-solve or address challenges. Although visual tools can be used in any setting to facilitate group processes, they are particularly valuable in situations where complex topics are at hand, or when groups have not established familiar relationships. There is a vast array of visual tools to draw on, thanks to many thought leaders who have developed these tools.

When used in facilitating meetings, workshops, or other work settings, visual tools add a welcome dimension to group processes. Creativity is spurred by tapping the visual sense, encouraging alternative modes of thinking that can illuminate unexplored issues. Relying on visual imagery can bring clarity to an issue, problem, or model in a way unparalleled by text or verbal discussion alone.

In our experience, the use of visual tools in facilitation has been valuable in:

- Encouraging inclusion and participation;
- Tapping into artistic and creative ways of expression that are often ignored or disregarded;
- Tapping into tacit knowledge;
- Triggering thoughtful conversation and dialogue;
- Allowing groups to discuss or express complex issues in a non-threatening way;
- Building group cohesion;
- Aiding memory recall and retention;
- Varying energy and format in group processes.

In this practice note we describe three tools: Visual Explorer, Graffiti Wall, and Murals/Tapestries. Each of these tools can be used in multiple contexts. In the experiences we share here Visual Explorer was used to unpack complex topics, Graffiti Wall helped discussion of sensitive issues, and Tapestry facilitated the consolidation of diverse ideas.

## Visual Explorer

Visual Explorer is described by the Center for Creative Leadership as a tool that “facilitates dialogue and helps groups reach a shared understanding about specific challenges”. As a resource for groups seeking to explore complex topics, Visual Explorer includes 224 carefully chosen color images that helps groups examine a complex problem and reach a shared understanding. In our work we have used this tool in the following improvised way:

- An array of images is spread on a table. These images are unrelated, portraying diverse scenes from nature, urban settings, etc. They may include? abstract images, images of paintings, or photographs.
- A question or topic is posed, and then participants are invited to individually select 1 – 3 images that intuitively represent/symbolize that question or issue for them. Participants are advised not to over-process the images, but to pick up the ones to which they feel drawn.
- Participants can then, individually or in groups, share why they selected the particular images and what these images signify.

At a staff training about cooperative research and learning methodologies, participants were asked to pick up images that represented their experiences in facilitating these methodologies. Facilitation is a complex topic with many subtleties and some participants had no experience facilitating cooperative research. Use of Visual Explorer in this case helped some participants imagine what facilitation is like, and others to articulate complex ideas. One participant chose the image of an underwater turtle, describing that the turtle signifies a facilitator who “feels totally comfortable in his/her environment and is able to navigate.” Another participant chose the image of a hurricane explaining that learning processes start with chaos and then converge towards “the central axis of a hurricane,” out of which order emerges. Using all the pictures we had a lively discussion about facilitation skills and the processes that facilitators should strive to instill in cooperative learning settings.

## Graffiti Wall

Just like graffiti can provide interesting clues into the history and society of a place, the Graffiti Wall technique is meant to project provocative issues discussed by a group onto a wall. Since graffiti is often associated with rebels, the Graffiti Wall is used to challenge the status

quo by raising provocative and critical questions, comments, and statements for all to see. The technique allows for the following:

- A candid and anonymous way of sharing sensitive thoughts.
- A transparent environment where possibly perturbing issues are posted for everyone to see.
- A chance to directly question, challenge, or confront dominant views.
- A way of addressing difficult topics instead of tip-toeing around them.

Graffiti Walls can be set up as follows:

- Provocative questions or statements are posted around the room either before a conversation or as these issues emerge during conversations.
- A facilitator can take periodic opportunities to discuss these issues as the event progresses, or a specific time can be set to discuss the Graffiti wall topics.
- An alternative is to invite participants to visit the wall, read the statements, and remark in written form by posting notes next to one or more statements.

At a convening of practitioners and academics, RCLA used Graffiti Wall to post some thorny topics on the wall. One of the statements read, "Academics have more power over research processes than practitioners." Using post-it notes, participants then commented in writing on the statements posted. Participants were also encouraged to raise their own provocative points on the wall. The Wall served as a reminder to address those issues, and as a space for a diverse array of voices to anonymously and candidly react to provocative issues that need to be contended with. Of course this is a risky process likened to opening up a can of worms. Yet it can be useful when the need exists to create a level of awareness in the room and acknowledge prickly issues.

### **Murals or Tapestries**

A mural or tapestry is a visual collage of ideas, issues, or questions that revolve around a common theme. We were introduced to this visual technique through the social change practitioners we work with, notably Arnold Aprill and Cara Page. In creating a tapestry, participants are provided with material that can range from paper and crayons, to pieces of cloth, to three-dimensional objects, and are asked to create a visual representation of a certain topic. Participants can work on the mural as a team, or as individuals developing separate pieces which then come together to form a mural. We have found that use of murals is a creative and effective way for consolidating thoughts after a group has had some

time to deliberate, rather than an exercise that spurs initial conversation and reflection. In addition, they are useful in:

- Exploring connections between seemingly different or separate issues.
- Producing a collective work that is representative of all voices.
- Representing synergy that emerges from compiling seemingly disparate thoughts into a coherent whole.

We have recently combined Visual Explorer and the mural creation method in a summer program called Beyond the Window. This is a program targeting young leaders and encouraging their involvement in the policymaking process, coordinated by RCLA and the Women of Color Policy Network at Wagner. The youth were asked to conceptualize a policy area/social problem that interests each of them, by using Visual Explorer. After this exercise and subsequent discussions, each person was asked to draw the envisioned solution to his/her issue of interest with the intention of creating a collective mural. The 'pieces' were then placed together into a mural that represented all policy issues of interest to the group, the solutions foreseen, and the connections between the issues, as well as the complexity faced. At the end of the process was a collective creative work that connected individuals' interests and desired changes.

**For more information on Visual Explorer, see [Center for Creative Leadership](#)**

**For more information on visual tools in general, see [Southbound](#)**