

Beyond the Paper

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CONNECTION, COLLABORATION, CREATIVITY: USING VISUALS FOR ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

Visual facilitation in an online context is about using visuals to create a deeper, richer environment for your participants.

Visual Goes Digital

Connection, Collaboration, Creativity



VISUAL FACILITATION ONLINE

I am not a professional graphic recorder. In fact, I can't even draw very well. But I do host online learning programs (and other participatory engagements), and visual awareness defines my work on many levels. Because I use visuals consciously and purposefully, I'm a 'visual facilitator' of sorts, and happy to share what I've learned with you.

Engagement, connection, collaboration, creativity, and transformative thinking—online visuals embody and serve each of these in unique ways. I hope my working notes in this chapter will be of value for your own online explorations.

CONTEXT

For the majority of my online hosting, I'm drawing on two primary senses—sight and sound. This chapter is about the first, obviously, but there is a reason for placing my emphasis on the physical senses of perception.

In broad terms, online work is often imagined as occurring within an abstract context. It's perceived as largely mental, 'virtual,' in many ways separate and distinct from the world of materiality and real life.

My work consciously counters this model of separation, which I find inadequate and even damaging.

I suggest that the use of sense-based language—language that evokes the senses through word and image, pace, sequencing, tone, line, color, and movement—is a strategic choice designed to bring myself, my co-hosts, and the groups we work with to increased presence and awareness as we work online.

By evoking a greater sense-awareness, we become more connected—to the wholeness within ourselves, to our bodies, to each other, and to our relationship with the natural world.

These connections needn't be made explicit—sense-based language affects us on subtle levels (though you might want to experience the observable shifts in yourself and others when the connections are made explicit).

Within this context, the use of visual language is a valuable ally that helps us transcend the sense of separation we can experience while meeting online. Additionally, it reaches those who learn visually, and adds depth and dimensionality to our communications. Imagery offers a universal language, one that engages both our hearts and minds.

Images connect us. They bring depth and evoke memories, they excite and stimulate— they are direct pathways to our human capacities for presence, symbolic thought, intuitive knowing, and imagination. I resonate with the way the Romantic poets of the 18th century spoke about imagination as the art of giving image to something we wouldn't otherwise see.

In any field, breakthrough thinking is a result of applying both science and art to create something new. The visual arts include a science of technique, but images also evoke in us a felt sense—a subtlety more related to art. It is this capacity within visual representation that most fascinates and motivates me.



In the context of my online work, visual facilitation can be described in four ways. These concepts are often applied together:

1. **Visual Elements, or enhancements.** These support the purpose or intention of an online experience.
2. **Evocative Triggers.** These call forward emotional responses and stimulate discovery and wonder.
3. **Harvesting.** This occurs both during the event

and afterwards, allowing the participants to expand and deepen learning by conveying the learned concepts to others.

4. **Universal Symbols.** These symbols awaken visionary thinking.

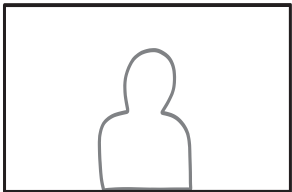
In practice, an image or visual element may be seen and utilized in multiple ways, often simultaneously. The next section offers examples, both simple and complex, to help you apply these visual facilitation techniques in online environments.

GET YOUR ONSCREEN APPEARANCE RIGHT

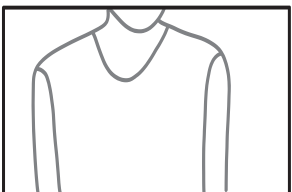
Appearances are as important online as they are everywhere else.



Not enough light



Too much light



Face not aligned



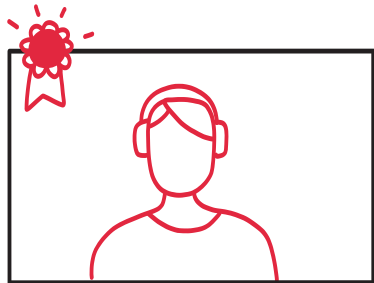
Busy background



Weird side light



Face not aligned



Well lit, nice/clear background, face lined up in the frame

As an online host, visual awareness starts with my own appearance and how my team and I show up visually online. Factors influencing visual elements are the quality and versatility of video cameras, lighting, and backdrops, or what is visible behind you.



Make sure you have a great profile image—this picture will appear by default if something goes wrong with your camera.

Backdrops function like a set in a movie or play. They have the power to remove visual distractions and focus the group's attention. Select your background to match the context of your online engagement:

A well-ordered office with flowers and art-work, or perhaps a commercially-purchased backdrop of solid color or a pattern.

COMMUNICATE!



Imagery adds another dimension to your communications. In invitations and promotional materials, a powerful photograph offers warmth and excitement, indicates the tone of the host, and adds subtle hints about the environment and purpose of the event.

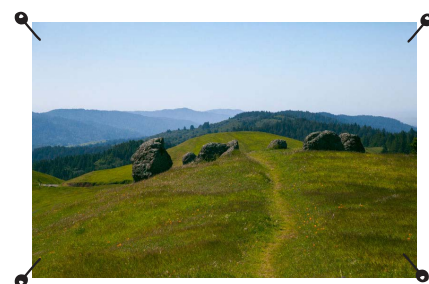


This promotional image begins to convey the feel of the course it describes.

SHARE A PHOTOGRAPH



In an online series focused on building community spirit and an awareness of our relationship with the natural world, my co-host and I asked participants to present a photograph of a place in nature that was special to them. They were invited to share their image (via screen share) and check in by reflecting on what that place meant to them. This simple exercise stimulated a powerful emotional response in the group.



My image shows Mount Tamalpais, a sacred mountain near my home.

When hosting in ceremonial contexts, for example, I might use a special blanket or a mandala as my background to help the group focus on our intention.

Paying attention to your appearance isn't about ego enhancement—it's about providing your participants with a clear and appropriate visual focus, which helps clarify the purpose of your engagement. When hosting online, everything is (very slightly) exaggerated, and your physical appearance can convey vast amounts of subtle information. Paying attention ensures it's the right information.

The following examples demonstrate how visuals can be used to enhance, stimulate response, harvest, and awaken visionary thinking during online engagements. I hope they spark your imagination about how you might use visuals in your own online work.

EVOCATIVE TRIGGERS



In that same series, my co-host and I often joined from outdoor locations, partnering with the natural world to advance the evocative triggers we wanted to bring forward in the course; namely, the discovery of nature as a partner in online hosting. Soon participants were doing the same thing, and the whole tone of the conversation changed, along with the level of engagement.



THE BEAUTY OF A SINGLE IMAGE



I often start my online courses and engagements with a meditation or moment of silence. During this time, screen sharing a soothing image, like an altar, candle, or single flower, provides participants a place to rest their eyes (and quiet their minds). It also serves to trigger what I call the beauty effect, opening viewers to a sense of awe and wonder while evoking gratitude for the gift of life. Occasionally I use a second external camera focused on a lit candle or running water for the same purpose.



A succulent mandala.

SHOW THE RULES OR PROCESS



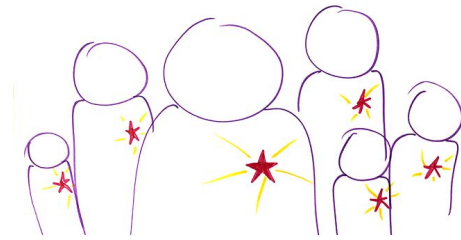
I ask presenters I'm working with to create single, stand-alone images to highlight key pieces of information, rather than using a PowerPoint presentation. Participants tend to feel more connected to the material, the presenter, and others in the group when they see a person, rather than a screen. For example, we used this image at the start of every online session to show our progress within a three session journey hosted for the Swedish Red Cross.



Showing progress in a three session journey for the Swedish Red Cross.

LET'S DRAW TOGETHER!

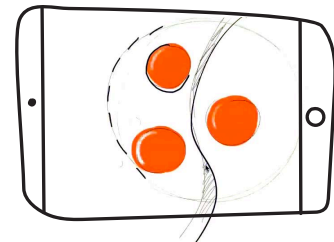
For a course on visual thinking, participants were invited to sketch assignments using paper and pen, showing them all at once via their video cameras so we could see each other's work. This simple hands-on exercise unleashed a wonderful sense of freedom and creativity, even among beginners. Seeing their own (and each other's) images displayed also served to harvest what participants had learned up to that point.



My sketch of people connecting heart-to-heart.

DRAWING ON SCREEN SHARING

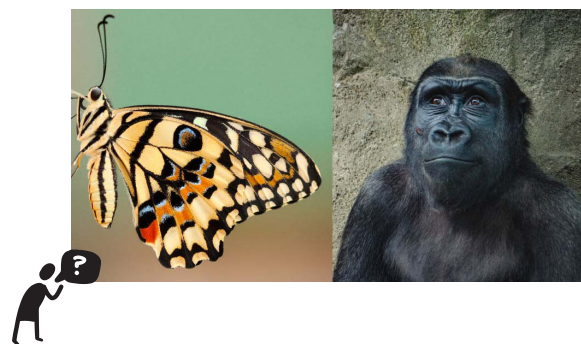
A presenter or facilitator may create live digital drawings and share these visual elements in real time to communicate key concepts. (I use Zoom¹, but most visual conferencing platforms include screen sharing tools.) Even roughly drawn images add depth and clarity to material that might otherwise be difficult to convey.



Instructor modeling the use of digital drawing tools.

BREAKOUT IMAGES

Breakouts for small group conversation are a staple ingredient in many of my online programs (again, Zoom Video Conferencing easily enables breakout sessions). I've used categories of images—animals, for example—to create evocative triggers to help participants choose which breakout to join, or to focus the conversation once they are in small groups.



Do you feel like a butterfly or a gorilla today?

¹ www.zoom.us

FOCUS ON VIDEO



Animation—short videos or film clips—are useful and versatile elements in any online visual toolbox. Videos serve many purposes, including the introduction of universal symbols to awaken new thinking. I use short videos as an invitation and to promote my online engagements, connecting directly with potential participants and giving them a sense of the material we will cover. When a co-host for a long-running series couldn't attend for one month, we created a short video of her sharing

greetings and a bit of content, which offered important continuity for the group, and allowed us the gift of her contribution. In another case, brief film clips containing specifically chosen universal symbols provided a stimulating beginning for focused conversation designed to open pathways to new ways of thinking. Other courses were built entirely around helping participants create their own 'vision videos.' In almost every case, the engagement is recorded and edited into an accessible video to share the experience and learning with others.

STARRING: ENGAGING UNIVERSAL SYMBOLS



In the realms of collaboration, visual elements that include universal symbols and evocative triggers play a starring role. They can be engaged creatively or applied to clarify understanding in individuals and groups. They can be the basis of a collective picture or visual. They can even be the focus of the whole engagement; for example, a course guiding the digital creation of individual and/or collective SoulCollage® cards².



When a participant in one of our courses became pregnant, this image served as an evocative trigger to invite the group's blessings for the new baby, which were then written out to frame the image.

VIRTUALLY REAL



The proliferation of augmented reality (AR), with capacity installed on every Apple iPhone X, dramatically changes the field of online facilitation. This subject warrants its own chapter, but briefly, I often use the three-dimensional virtual world Second Life³ to open, stretch, inspire, and inform participants. Second Life also supports the ability to prototype and co-design, and virtually inhabit different points of view by selecting avatars of any gender, race, age, or lifestyle.



A creative ensemble event in Second Life.

² www.soulcollage.com

³ www.secondlife.com

VISUAL HARVESTING

Perhaps the most well-known method of visual facilitation, harvesting is equally popular online and on-site. Given the nuances of applying this important use of visual facilitation online, it warrants special attention here.

Capturing and sharing our learning is an important part of my work, and is essential when hosting World Cafés⁴ and other participatory practices. Ideally this process—called harvesting in participatory practice—is done in collaboration with a graphic recording professional (or digital recorder, in my case). I often work with graphic professionals in advance, creating images to convey key information during a session, as well.

To clarify—when I say *digital recording*, I am referring to visual recording done on a digital device, connected to the internet, that can be shared visually with online participants in real time.

Visual recording can also be done online using low-tech methods like paper and pen, and either photographed and shared with

participants later, or shown in real time via a camera pointed at the recorder’s workstation.

One of the first things to clarify when working with a visual recorder—beyond defining the purpose, scope, and agreements associated with the project—is *how* you want them to work. For example, some situations ask a visual recorder to be alert to patterns and require an ability to reflect themes, while other situations may demand a faithful representation of what is spoken.



Digitally recorded ‘harvest’ from an online community World Café..

TESTING, TESTING. ONE, TWO . . .

Regardless of your platform, it’s helpful to test and retest equipment on the day of your presentation so the process is smooth for your visual recorder and appears seamless to participants.

To maximize the value offered by live digital recording, I often ask the recorder to direct their camera in such a way that their drawing can be highlighted at various points to show their work as it progresses. But in any case, I always ask them to share their screen at the end of the session, and to personally walk the group through what they have heard and captured. The visual capture of process and results, as well as any visuals created during the program, may also be shared as part of the post-event documentation, to demonstrate what we learned and experienced with others, beyond our immediate participants. In all cases, having a visual recorder present as part of your facilitation team adds enormous value to the online experience and contributes greatly to the group’s learning, understanding, and retention.

Author note: *I hope this short overview has given you a glimpse into the many ways thoughtful visual facilitation can impact and support your work online. May it encourage you to experiment and explore visuals as a powerful ally in your own online engagement, as you create the conditions for meaningful online experiences with others.*

With grateful thanks to my collaborative partner in online explorations, Fire-Hawk Hulin, for contributing key ideas to this chapter.

4. www.theworldcafe.com