

Complexity and rich pictures

Using a 'rich picture' is a way of depicting a complex situation in a visual form¹. Its purpose is to surface your perception or impression of a situation that you are facing in a visual and holistic way. It depicts the primary actors in a situation, their inter-relationships and concerns. It gives your broad, 'high-grain' representation of a situation. In conversation with others, it allows for different perspectives to be shared and the possibility for new interpretations and insights to emerge.

There is no single best way of drawing 'rich' pictures. Everyone's perspective and approach will be different. There are lots of ways of sketching a good rich picture and very few ways of sketching a bad one.

Guidelines

1. A rich picture is an attempt to assemble *everything* that might be relevant to a complex situation- it is never complete and is just a snap-shot in time.
2. To help interpret a situation, choose symbols, scenes or images that represent the situation, as you see it. Use as many colours as necessary and draw the symbols on a large piece of paper- use the whole page. You do not need to be an artist (and it probably helps if you are not!).
3. Put in whatever connections you see between your pictorial symbols: avoid producing merely an unconnected set. Places where connections are lacking may later prove significant.
4. Avoid too much writing, although 'word bubbles' coming from people's mouths may help- only if you use their words- not your interpretation!
5. You should not seek to impose any style or structure on your picture. Place the elements on your sheet wherever your instinct prompts. At a later stage you may find that the placement itself has a message for you.
6. If you 'don't know where to begin', then the following sequence may help to get you started:
 - a. first look for the elements of structure and key actors/roles in the situation (the people, the set-ups, the command hierarchy, perhaps) and draw these;
 - b. next look for elements of process and inter-relationships within the situation (the activities, social roles and quality of interactions that are going on) and draw these;
 - c. If you see any tensions or conflicts between the key actors or the way that structures and the processes interact, then indicate these. Likewise, where things are working well. You may want to use symbols, like forked lightning or sunshine. Doing this will give you an idea of the climate of the situation.
 - d. Make sure that your picture includes not only the factual data about the situation, but also the subjective information. Thought bubbles can also give a sense of some of the issues/concerns that key players are carrying

¹ Rich Pictures originated from Soft Systems Methodology (Checkland and Howell) which was developed in the 70's.

Finally, include yourself in the picture. Make sure that your roles and relationships in the situation are clear. Remember that you are not an objective observer, but someone with a set of values, beliefs and norms that colour your perceptions.



Some questions to ask yourself when drawing your rich picture:

- Does this rich picture represent the situation as holistically as possible or is it just my interpretation of what the problem is?
- Is this rich picture telling just one story or is it rich enough to suggest lots of stories about what's going on?
- Have I included everything I know about the situation in my representation of it?

Some questions for reflection:

- What strikes you immediately?
- What stands out the most? What colour is the strongest and what might this be saying?
- Anything different, new or missing?
- Any new insights about this complex situation- and how to handle it?