“Yes, you can”, the trainers told us gently as we started our three-day training course in graphic facilitation at The Grove Consultants International in San Francisco.

“No, I can’t,” I thought. I can’t draw — at least not well enough to show in public and certainly never well enough to record graphically in front of a group.

Yes, you can, the trainers insisted.

“No, I can’t.”

And then as I looked at my first drawings, created my first graphic templates, did my first graphic recording in real time in a conference room in a building overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge, I thought, “I can do this. I’ll need more practice, but yes, despite my doubts, I really can.”

Perhaps, more importantly, I thought, “I need to learn to do this; it’s so powerful.”

Graphic believers

During the last afternoon I wondered if I was alone in becoming a believer. I wasn’t. Angel Garretson, one of my classmates who works for the State of California facilitating sessions with appointees of Gov. Gray Davis, said she feared drawing before she came to class. “The training,” she said, “takes the paranoia out of it.”

Andreas Breiler, a principal in a Sweden-based consulting firm, said, “I can’t draw worth beans and my letters are always screwed up. Now, I can do the small stuff and I’ll get the big stuff mastered later.”

Deb Lambert, a facilitator at Scripps Memorial Hospital in La Jolla, California, said, “Anybody can do the basics. What I drew may not look like that raft,” she said pointing to the shape drawn on the four by eight-foot poster on the wall, “but it doesn’t have to in order to be effective.”

It can be more primitive looking, she explained, and still get the point across that people in the group are taking a journey.

Grove instructors Tomi Nagai-Rothe and Tom Benthin had turned us into believers ever so gently. I came to class wanting new tools for my toolbox. I came wanting to know how The Grove tools might work with some of the other methodologies out there, like the Technology of Participation (ToP) group facilitation method authored by the Institute of Cultural Affairs. I came as a “newbie” to graphic facilitation.

Chunking away at insecurities

Right from the beginning, Nagai-Rothe and Benthin started chunking away at our drawing insecurities by focusing our attention on the agenda, roles, rules and outcomes, which were listed in boxes on the template with a raft on it. The Grove often uses a raft filled with people heading down a mountain river to start these sessions and help participants visualize they are embarking on a journey.

The first bullet point under outcomes boldly stated, “Reclaim your natural ability to draw.”

The next was “Learn repertoire of fundamental graphic icons.” This was followed by items including, “Learn the group graphics keyboard” and “Design your own templates.”
We were going to learn; it was on the agenda. And both instructors were rock-solid confident we would.

**Graphic recording in action**

Benthin then showed us how graphic recording is done. While Nagai-Rothe facilitated, he recorded our hopes and expectations for the course on the top half of a 4x8 foot sheet of white paper and our roots and influences on the bottom. He separated the drawing into halves with a horizon line and a star-figure of a person standing at the horizon. Benthin used a combination of sketches and pictures as metaphors for each concept. In graphic facilitation, we were shown, the simple elements of illustration – lines and circles – serve as symbols of real-life. A square with a triangle on top would “symbolize” a house versus taking the time to detail it by adding windows, door, chimney, etc.

To depict one participant’s reason for coming to the course, Benthin recorded the words “reinvent myself” along with small pictures of squiggly lines in one frame and the head of a person in another. The first was labeled “writing”; the second “strategy.” An arrow pointed from the writing frame to the strategy frame. To show my expectation for the course, he drew a simple box above the horizon line and labeled it “Fill my toolbox.” He captured both concepts perfectly.

Next, we spent time on The Grove’s “Group Graphics Keyboard” – a visual display of the seven different types of graphics used in facilitation and strategic planning exercises. They call it a keyboard because it’s to be played (read “used”) creatively (read “choose items as they fit the circumstance”) like a musical instrument, not to be followed slavishly in sequential fashion.

On the keyboard are posters, lists, clusters, grids, diagrams, drawings and mandalas. We needed to know that each is appropriate in different circumstances. Posters, for example, are good for introductions, diagrams work well for process maps, grids can show data and illuminate history, and drawings can be the foundation for templates. In every instance, we learned that graphics could be adapted to work with other facilitation methodologies, like ToP, for instance.

**Drawing 101**

Now it was time for the course’s main event: drawing. It started with physical exercise. We were taught to plant our feet and center our bodies. We held our arms high and let them drop, simulating how it would feel to draw vertical lines. We held out one arm and then the other and traced the horizon to practice drawing horizontal lines. We pretended to throw a Frisbee up from our right foot across our body and out through the roof on the left. Then we did it the other way from left to right. This was to help us get a feel for drawing diagonal lines. Using our shoulder as the focal point, we moved our arms in a circular fashion to get the feel for drawing big circles.

With the motions now engrained in our memory, we stepped up to our own 4 foot by 8 foot sheets of paper and, using markers, started drawing vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines and circles. Looking at every student’s paper, no outsider would have known we had just started drawing. The lines were straight, the circles were circles. No doubt about it.

**Now draw!**

The foundation now laid, we built on our skills over the next two and a half days.

The first afternoon we learned about color and form, about marker thickness and shadings. We ended that first day by pairing up and doing historical timelines of each other’s career – again on 4 foot by 8 foot sheets of paper – drawing in locations, places and memorable elements at each stage.

The second day we translated a defining moment in our facilitation careers into a visual. We then broke into teams to draw specifics around The Grove’s “four flows” of activity that facilitators must manage in working with groups. These include items from intuition and group dynamics to room set-up and tools.

The second day we translated a defining moment in our facilitation careers into a visual. We then broke into teams to draw specifics around The Grove’s “four flows” of activity that facilitators must manage in working with groups. These include items from intuition and group dynamics to room set-up and tools.

We did more drawing, this time focusing on letters. In teams we created wall-sized charts to explore topics and record conclusions. One team that tackled the topic “relationships” ended up with a balloon as its conclusion. The balloon signified both the fun and shape of a beautiful relationship. Instructors encouraged us to borrow what we saw from fellow classmates and to trace over items we liked to help upload images into our heads.
On the last day, we started with drawing practice. Our focus was on depth and landscapes. We designed templates, looking for custom solutions to class members' individual, from-the-job situations. One, for example, involved symptoms and root causes and one suggestion was a giant tree above ground connecting to a root system below ground.

**So how did we do?**

As a test of how well we were adapting, at the end of the third and last day, we did what instructor Benthin had done at the opening of training the first morning. For 15 minutes, every person in the class recorded live graphically. Both Benthin and Nagai-Rothe recorded as well, veterans challenging themselves to push the envelope in a safe environment.

The critiques showed how far we had come – and how far we had to go. I was in the half of the class that recorded the topic “Cheap Fun.” Classmates sat in a group and brainstormed “Cheap Fun,” rapidly spitting out ideas like a machine gun firing bullets – ideas from fishing to shopping to sex. There must have been 75 in all, though no one facilitated in the traditional sense, prompting for additional responses or asking whether people felt hopeful or discouraged as a result. This was strictly a recording session. I raced around my 4 by 8 foot sheet of paper recording words and pictures here and there in a pattern I hoped would make sense when it was all done. To say it was elementary would have been a compliment.

Nagai-Rothe, by contrast, started with a simple, elegantly-lettered list and then about a third of the way through began to draw a scene with water in the foreground, mountains in the back, the Golden Gate Bridge on one side and a park, trees and a road in the middle. Pictures of people and structures with perhaps a word or two were strategically placed in the landscape — a boy fishing on the shore of the water, a dog in the park, a bus traveling down a road — all of them depicting a form of cheap fun. She had captured the conversation simply and perfectly.

Pure poetry, I thought. And, yes, I can – but with a touch more practice!  

---

**Certificate, Praise, Recognition**

---

**...graphic facilitation in the executive suite?**

---

**Certificate, Praise, Recognition**

---

**The Facilitator**

The Facilitator is a quarterly professional publication. To order a sample issue or subscribe to The Facilitator, contact

**The Facilitator**

P O Box 670705
Dallas, TX 75367-0705
Phone: 972.243.1356
Fax: 972.243.1357
Email: snure@TheFacilitator.com
www.TheFacilitator.com

© Nurre Ink. All rights reserved.

---

**Bill Bancroft** is Principal with conbrio, a Dallas-based consulting practice which offers facilitation, strategy and communication services to companies, not-for-profits and governmental entities. conbrio teams with clients to launch new initiatives, build political and financial support to better meet stakeholder needs, and build organization success.
But will it work in the executive suite?

That was one of my questions going into the training.

One of my classmates, Bo Gyllenpalm, the former Chief Executive Officer (CEO) at Phillips, the European electronics manufacturer—Philips ranks 10th on Fortune’s list of top global electronics companies—answered yes, emphatically.

Gyllenpalm currently works as a consultant and is a leader in the The World Café movement, an approach to problem-solving where participants shift from small group to small group in a single setting to talk through issues (check out www.theworldcafe.com). Graphic recording is a key component of The World Café methodology.

During a critique of one of the exercises in class, Gyllenpalm criticized bullet point lists, saying no one can remember them. Elaborating later, he said, “People today are so sick and tired of those bullet point things.” Even when bullet points are listed on flip charts as part of a group session, he said, “they don’t say very much. No one can see how the group came to a conclusion.”

By contrast, with graphic recording, Gyllenpalm said, participants “see and remember much more of what was said. They remember the experience and feelings and emotions, so when they show someone else who hasn’t been there, they make a personal story of what happened, they remember much more of the discussions and what they mean.”

As someone who has been on the receiving end of countless briefings from mid-level managers, it is the “story with all its richness” that Gyllenpalm said he most wants to hear—and that his fellow CEOs want to hear as well.

I’m sold. ø