

Picture This: Using Images to Gather and Communicate Evaluation Data  
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In this interactive skill-building workshop designed for evaluation practitioners, facilitators will share their experiences with and what they have learned about using photographic and drawn images to gather and communicate evaluation data with and among various types of stakeholder groups. Participants will then practice using images in order to experience the approach and build their skills.

Workshop objectives include:

- Building knowledge about the process of using images to gather and communicate evaluation data and findings.
- Developing skills in using images to gather and communicate evaluation data and findings.
- Understanding the benefits and challenges associated with using images in their evaluation practice.
- Develop awareness of strategies for combining images with other evaluation data to create a more comprehensive “picture” of evaluation results.

In our experience with this approach, images have the power to cross language and cultural boundaries, and thus can be used as a tool to engage a broader range of stakeholders in the evaluation process. The evocative nature of images can serve as a powerful mechanism for communicating findings that can “speak to” different stakeholder groups in a way that may convey the evaluation results more meaningfully and more accurately. Images and metaphors can prompt deeper reflection on the personal experience and illustrate the impact of a program to stakeholders in a way that is more accessible than graphs and tables. In order for evaluations to be useful, stakeholders must engage in the process of evaluation and understand the results of (and implications of) the evaluation.

### **Why use images?**

Some of the benefits of using a pictorial approach include:

- Tapping into personal experiences and passions.
- Surfacing and engaging emotional undercurrents.
- People frame and illustrate their thoughts with each other.
- Surfacing individual and shared assumptions.
- Allows for self-disclosure and vulnerability in a safe context.
- Understanding multi-dimensional concepts.
- Images bridge differing context and cultures.

Researchers at the Center for Creative Leadership have developed an expansive set of tools to help groups engage in mediated dialogue. Recognizing that dialogue is a difficult skill to develop, the use of an artefact or identity object has been found to help facilitate a group in engaging in dialogue. The process of dialogue requires surfacing assumptions and understandings, displaying these publicly, and creating shared sense-making through inquiry (Palus & Drath, 2001). When an evaluation process has a need to uncover assumptions and create meaning, a mediate approach using images may be a fruitful process—not just collecting data, but also engaging participants and others in a developmental experience. Other researchers within the visual sociology, ethnography or anthropology field have found photography a valuable means of qualitative research (Schwartz, 1989; Weade & Ernst, 2001; Brace-Govan, 2007). According to Weade and Ernst (pg. 133), “they [metaphors] take us beyond the particular, the literal and the moment to moment details of everyday experience...language, then, provides ways of assigning meaning to what we encounter visually, and it enables us to extend or enhance our interpretations of what we see.”

## Ways in Which to Use Images for Data Collection

The ways in which images can be used to facilitate dialogue and collect data are quite expansive. Here are a few possible ways to use images as part of an evaluation process.

- Interviews: Allowing an individual to select or bring an image that is representative of their experience or based upon a specific evaluation question. Can look at pre and post program experience to understand change over time.
- Focus Groups: Allowing participants to select or bring one or more images to discuss individually with additional perspectives from group members helps to facilitate deep dialogue and sense-making.
- Creating a story board: An individual or group can use images (pictures, drawings) to tell the story of their journey over time.
- Creating a collage: An individual or group collage can help to uncover connections and patterns not apparent through group discussions.
- Needs assessment: At the individual or group level using images to understand the current situation and desired future state.
- Appreciative Inquiry: Helping people to express the positives or strengths within individuals and communities.
- Vision setting: Helping a group to create a positive vision of the future.

## How to Collect Data Using Images

Prior to engaging in a session using images, it can be helpful to have an introductory portion that connects the individual or participant with the “object” or “evaluated” that will be the focus. If the purpose is to evaluate the program implementation, it might be beneficial to review the program process from beginning to end, to prime participants for the metaphoric journey.

You should plan on at least 90 minutes for a full group session.

The basic steps for a group activity are:

1. **Frame-** provide a guiding question(s) to frame the participants selection of an image.  
*(Ex. Think about the positive things that have happened in your school as a result of your participation in the program. Select an image that represents the changes in your school as a result of your development as a leader.)*
2. **Browse-** let participants browse the images (or set them up with the question(s) before hand and ask them to bring or create an image) until they find one that speaks to them in response to the question (The connection of the image to the question can be literal, or it may be emotional, metaphorical, aesthetic, or intuitive). This should take maybe 5 minutes. You may want to play some instrumental music during this portion. It is advantageous to prevent the participants from speaking with one another, and the music may help.
3. **Reflect-** Each person examines the images he or she has selected, and reflects on how the image connects in any ways to the framing question. *“Pay attention to each image you selected. What is it? What is happening in it? What is the context? Anything surprising? How does it connect to the framing question?”* (This reflection time is critical for fostering the discussion- should allow 5-10 minutes- may even have them journal their thoughts).
4. **Share-** this is when participants will go around the circle one by one- placing their card in the middle of the table. The group (or sub-groups) sit in a circle. One person at a time shares his or her image(s) as follows:

First: *“Share the image and describe the image itself (forget about any connection to the question for a moment). What is it? What is happening? What do you notice?”*

Second: *“What connections do you make from the image to the question? How is the image a response to the question?”*

**Third:** Each person in the group responds to the image(s) offered by this first person. Each response may also have two parts: “*What do you see in the image? Do you see the same things that other’s see? What stands out to you?*” AND THEN: “*What connections do you make from the image to the question?*” After the first person has shared their images around the group in this way, he or she thanks the group, and the conversation moves on to the next person and their image(s). Continue until everyone has shared their images.

The process used for sharing the information is called the Star Model and is adapted from Montague Ullman (1996). Members of the group are located as if on the points of a star, with the image (the something in the middle) in the neutral space in the center. People are able to give and take from this center point, rather than from individual to individual (Palus & Drath, 2001).

5. **Extend-** this is the point at which you can have them select additional images to represent the next questions- or just focus the follow-up discussion on the additional questions.

### **Communicating Evaluation Results Using Images**

The power of using images in evaluation is not constrained to data collection or collective sense-making by a group, though those are both powerful outcomes. Another powerful use of images is in communicating experiences and participant’s realities to a broad set of stakeholders. These stakeholders may include:

- The participants themselves. Seeing their individual and group experiences communicated provides a sense of empowerment and continues to deepen the relationship between participants and with the evaluator and program staff.
- Staff: Seeing the images and explanations can help them gain new perspectives on their work.
- Funders: Images go beyond graphs and numbers to provide a window into the multiple realities constructed by individuals, groups and communities.
- Communities: The adage, “A picture is worth a thousand words” can be realized when using images to convey the value of a program to the public. When it is the community itself who had participated in an initiative, providing the images back creates a powerful sense of ownership.

Images and the metaphors provided during the evaluation can be put into a PowerPoint presentation, report, scrapbook, wall collage or other medium for presentation. Combining a graph/table with a corresponding image helps to provide multiple perspectives and triangulation of the data. It can also help to spark meaningful dialogue with the stakeholder group.

In summary, using images during an evaluation can tap into hidden meaning, not evident in survey responses, communicate a deeper depth of understanding and experience, and empower individuals as part of the process. Images can be provided, created by participants (drawn/photographed), or selected by the individual (magazines, other media), providing great flexibility to both the evaluator and participant. Images can be used in a wide variety of ways to collect and communicate data.

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Ullman, M. (1996). *Appreciating dreams: A group approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Weade R., & Ernst, G. (2001). Pictures of life in classrooms, and the search for metaphors to frame them. *Theory Into Practice*, 29 (2), 133-140.