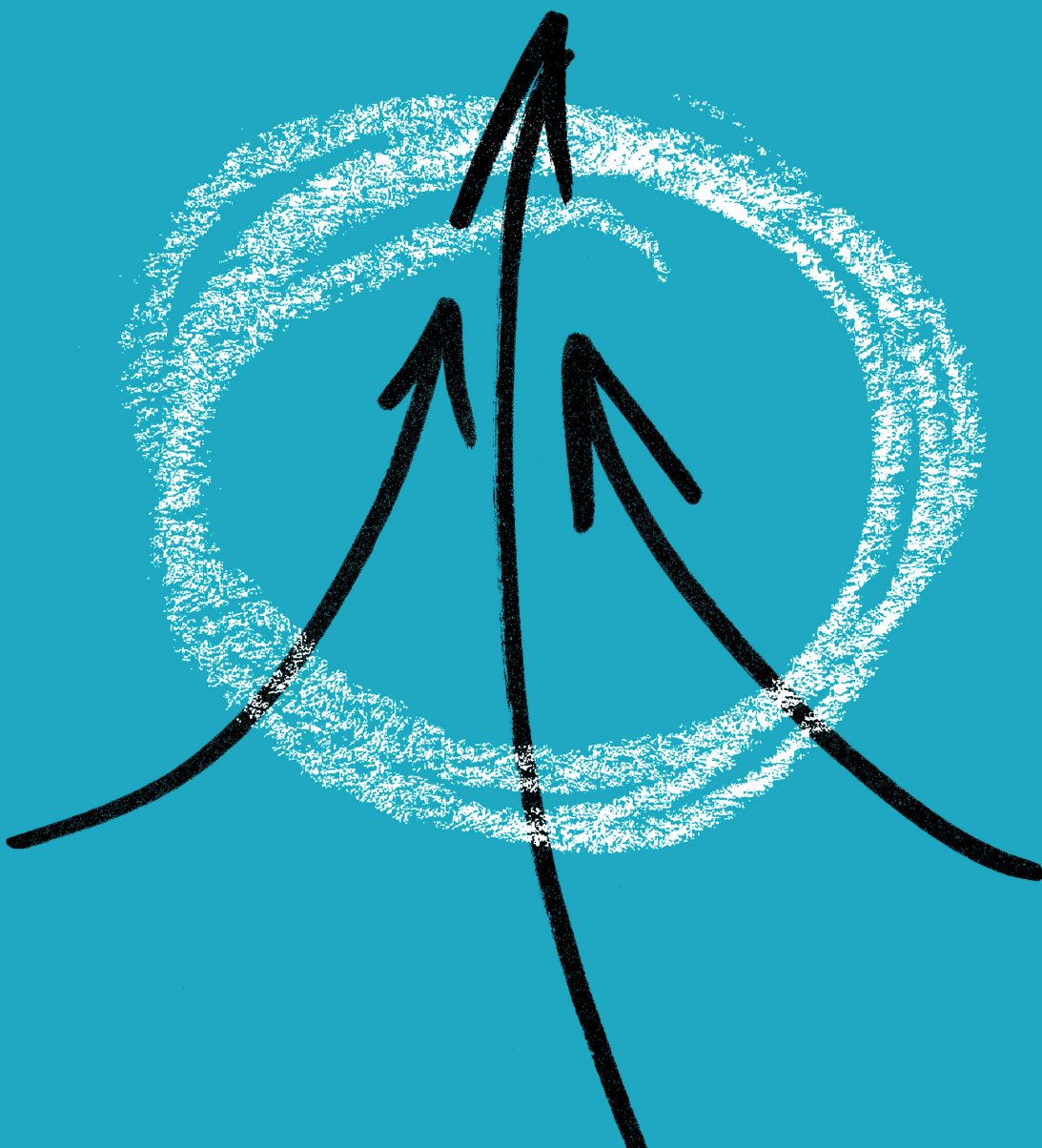# Drawn Together Through
VISUAL PRACTICE

An Anthology Edited by
Brandy Agerbeck, Kelvy Bird, Sam Bradd & Jennifer Shepherd

This anthology contains exciting and varied contributions to the growing literature on visual language and its power to "draw us" together. The authors offer a wide range of experience, powerful illustrations and the core message that visual language enables us to learn, think, and grow in new ways – especially when considering the complex relationships that words alone can't illuminate. Drawn Together through Visual Practice reflects the power of this field to help transform organizations and communities in life-affirming ways.
– *Juanita Brown PhD, Co-Founder, The World Cafe*

After 45 years of drawing on the wall it is extraordinary to see this field bloom in such rich and contributive ways. The authors are the cambium layer—advancing and shaping it with practice and questions—providing inspiration for all of us who are living into this emergent, hopeful, phenomenon.
– *David Sibbet, The Grove Consultants International*

The field of visual practice has long been nurtured by the quiet presence of artists devoted to listening and serving the groups with whom they work. It is high time that they turned and faced the room and shared the depth of artisanal practice and craft that underscores their devotion to the work. This collection is a stunning revelation of the heart of this practice. Whatever your role in group work, you will be made better by listening to these voices and stories of experience, sensitivity and careful attention.
– *Chris Corrigan, Art of Hosting and Harvest Moon Consulting*

A first-rate look at the new world of visual practice. I know from personal experience that capturing content and discussion in real time imagery can help create communal understanding and memory. The images give participants a shared visual vocabulary that help capture complex ideas and enable the move to new discoveries and innovations. The book is a delightful dive into understanding the background and development of this new teaching/art form. Enjoy.
– *Deborah Ancona, Seley Distinguished Professor of Management, Faculty Director of the MIT Leadership Center, MIT Sloan School of Management*

I've seen visual practice map ideas, refresh memories, and provoke insights in many meetings involving dozens of professionals from business, government, and education. So it's a special delight to discover this collection representing the art, craft, and inspiration of visual practice from multiple perspectives.
– *David N. Perkins, Carl H. Pforzheimer, Jr., Research Professor of Teaching and Learning, Harvard Graduate School of Education*

Graphic facilitation is a powerful way for a group to come to know themselves and the work they want to do together. It is no wonder that it so quickly became a part of any good meeting, conference, or problem solving session! Drawn Together is a valuable book, timely and well thought through. It should be read and employed by all wanting to improve and accelerate the rate of change and innovation within an organization, executive team or community. The more diversity in the room, the more powerful visual imagery becomes.
– *Gail Taylor, Co-Founder of MG Taylor, Inc., Founder of Tomorrow Makers, Inc.*

At last! A compendium of stories, helpful approaches and mind sets that reflects the diversity, the richness of scope and the broad impact of the growing field of visual practice/visual language. Our visual practice not only encompasses 'making the invisible visible' and 'making the visible visual' through many artistic means, but also, it incorporates all the human elements of working together, listening, and inclusion that our world is crying for. The potential is unlimited. This is a must read for people who are looking for ways to make substantial change and impact in our world as a group or as an individual and who are looking for paths to go 'from my way to our way'.
– *Susan Kelly, Visual Practitioner*

Drawn Together offers me tools to reflect and improve on developing campaigns for Lush, and encourages personal reflection on my process. A tremendous job bringing together a picture of the evolving work and sharing best practices.
– *Carleen Pickard, Ethical Campaigns Specialist, Lush Handmade Cosmetics, North America*

Contents

The Thermal Lift of Visualization

How to empower people in visual thinking, learning and co-creation

Martin Haussmann
Interviewed by Brandy Agerbeck

Brandy: *Your team at bikablo® akademie in Cologne, Germany has taught thousands to adopt visual language to express themselves in their work at meetings. Where did it begin? And tell us about the name.*

Martin: About eight years ago, in our "mothership," the organizational consultancy Kommunikationslotsen, I worked in a team of graphic recorders with our facilitators Holger Scholz and Roswitha, mostly within large group conferences. We started a collaboration with Guido Neuland from the learning tool manufacturer Neuland. Guido likes to draw and has been very much into the visual thinking from the beginning. He immediately said, "Let's create a product. Let's do a visual dictionary which covers all the pictures you do in your graphic recording."

I said, "Twenty or thirty pages maybe?" In the end, the first bikablo® turned out to be more than 100 pages.

Guido had already produced a deck of cards for moderation and facilitation called "MoKaBlo." *Mo* for moderation, *ka* for karte, the German word for cards, and *blo* for block. Since our deck was images, the first part of the new name came from Bild, the German word for pictures. bikablo®. We liked the name, it sounded fancy and a bit mystic. That was the beginning.

At that time we didn't think of having our own visual facilitation academy, it was just an exciting name for a book that turned out to be a quick best-seller. A second bikablo® visual dictionary came out with more sophisticated subjects, later bikablo® emotions with visualized people in situations, and now it is a whole range of products.
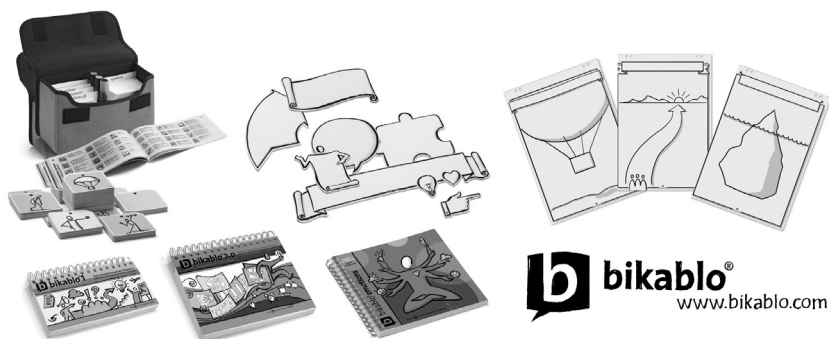
Two years ago, we decided to create our own visual facilitation training company as a spin off from Kommunikationslotsen. Everyone knew it had to be called bikablo® akademie. All our clients knew and loved the brand because it always showed a certain kind of attitude towards visualizing and drawing.

B: *I like that it's a friendly, accessible sound. Also, it's three root words put together—exactly what you are teaching when you are talking about taking simple icons and putting them together to represent more complex ideas. I studied German in high school and when I first saw a bikablo®, I was instantly attracted to the German-ness of all the root words coming together.*

M: Recently I talked to Marcel, our trainer in Australia and New Zealand. He suggested to keep the German spelling, bikablo® akademie, because people down under like the German engineering attitude. I can tell you more about the German craftsmanship behind bikablo® in a minute.

B: *In 2011, you and Holger invited me to do a workshop with your students. The day before, I sat in on the last part of your two-day beginner training. Your participants were sharing their own visualized posters applied what they had learned to a scenario in their work life. Even though I was listening through rusty high school German, watching body language, and watching what people were doing in these drawings—I thought their work was amazingly sophisticated. I think it really reflected how you're talking about first connecting with the joy of drawing, and getting people that sense of mastery even if it's really simple icons. Can you tell me more about how your students develop so quickly?*

M: This is where "German engineering and craftsmanship" fits in. At the bikablo® akademie we have a very strong design-driven approach and that is crucial for our way of empowering people without previous graphic knowledge. We call it the bikablo® technique and we have it copyright[ed] because we want people to learn it "from the source." Today our 20-person bikablo® trainer-team offers basic, advanced, open, and in-house classes for over 2,500 people a year based on this methodology.

To get started, we often ask participants to remember how we drew during childhood. We connect to the success we felt when we were young and we find out the success factors we had when we intuitively drew as children. Not drawing big strokes or filling in with a brush—but take your pen and draw a simple outline. The second success factor is to copy. You see a pictogram or visual in our bikablo® books, or on a road sign or wherever. Children use to copy from classmates' drawings or comic books they like.

For example, we simply ask our participants to write down the letters U, Z, M, and O. Without knowing, they have already drawn a lightbulb, our UZMO lightbulb. The clue is to combine the letters in a specific way:

When they do it again, they remember the shape. They remember the steps. They remember the results, and they also remember that once

they draw this and they look around the room they see 14 different lightbulbs drawn with the same system. Each one is unique. And the next time they draw it, it will be slightly different. You can teach this to everyone in the world in 10 seconds.

This is on the one hand a basic example for our very technical and logic[al], systematic approach—the "German engineering and crafts-manship." And it enables the joy of creativity that is set free by fast learning success in a trustful training community. These are the basic pillars of our training concept.

Let me explain the system behind the bikablo® technique in a visual metaphor:

I come from a very lovely area in Southern Germany, the "Schwäbische Alb." There are lowlands and highlands with cliffs. If you sit up there on a weekend, which I love to do with my wife and little son, you can observe gliders. One day I asked myself: How can they get up there more than 400 meters in the air without an engine? I learned they use the thermal lift—the warm air that rises from the ground to spin up in gentle spirals.
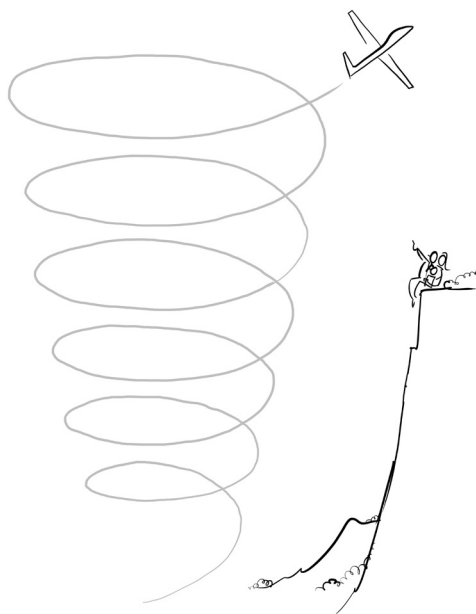
That is the concept of our training. It's always doing small "iterative" circles of learning, moving you up quickly and gently. The thermal lift in our trainings is the group process. At the very beginning, there's a simple invitation:

We ask people to take the first step and learn how to use the materials: hold the pen properly and make bold strokes on the surface.

The second one combines moving lines into basic shapes. We take a lot of time drawing proper circles and squares.

The next iterative loop is to recombine the basic shapes to the visual vocabulary of icons, graphics, containers, and people. The UZMO lightbulb, the doggy-ear-document, or simple people—everything is drawn out of recombined basic shapes. At first, we only drew people with an O and upside-down U, now we have also our system of "emotions"-

people to act as protagonists for visual storytelling. It took us over 10 years to select, refine, and reduce the unique bikablo® iconography, and it's still going on. In this iteration, we also add color. We do our special kind of shading—which is very simple; anyway, we take a lot of time to teach people because they desperately want to know how to do it properly.

Adding text we recombine visual vocabs to senseful key visuals. Text information is very important to us. People frequently forget about it because they think of visualization as just pictures. We also introduce how to improve the handwriting.
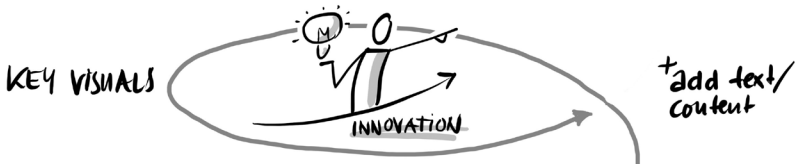
Then, with some generative layout templates and imagery, we recombine key visuals and text to complex layouts and pictorial landscapes.
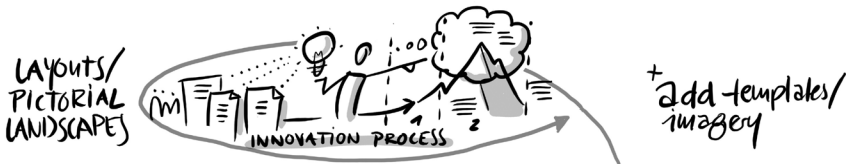
And after learning all this, people recombine these elements with their own work context to create presentation posters or templates for visual facilitation or graphic recording.

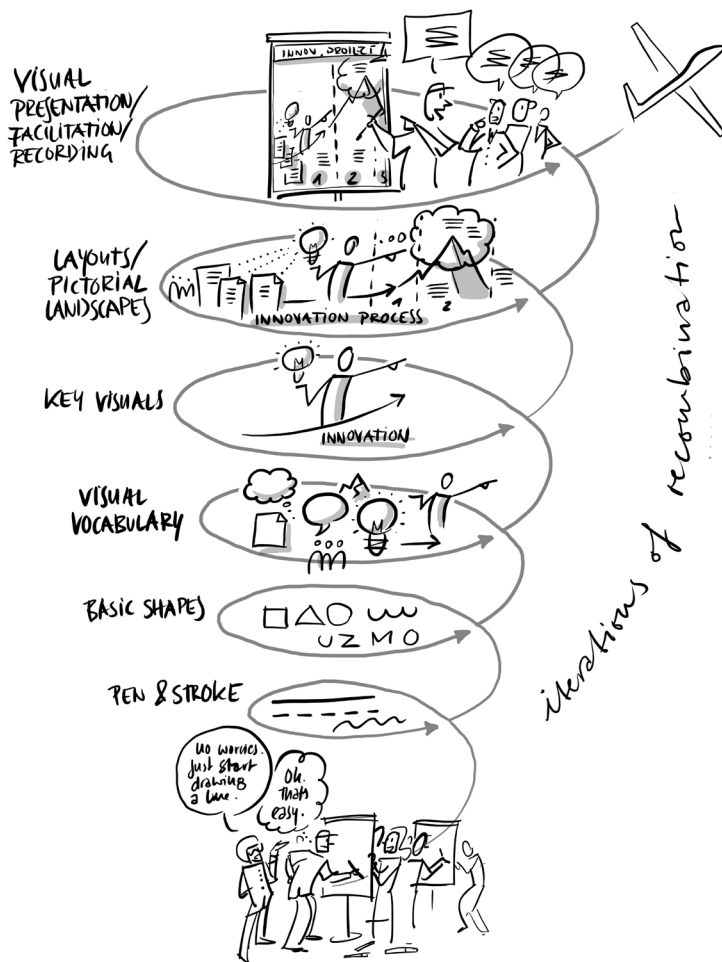It's like verbal language where you first have syllables, then words, then sentences, and then stories. This was the point you saw on your visit, where our participants designed great, sophisticated posters, because they knew how to combine the elements and feel confident in doing so.

This is what I meant when I said it is German engineering sense because it is very systematic. There are rules for everything. There is a rule for how to hold the pen and how to draw a stroke. Professional illustrators or cartoonists may think this is boring, and some colleagues in the training field (that never visited our trainings) accuse us to limit creativity with our rules, but our participants understand it is completely the other way around, because every rule is an offer and a support to create their own visual storytelling.

Generally spoken the way we empower people is like running a foreign language class. When learning a language, you may like to jot down the foreign words in a vocabulary notebook, and then pronounce them again and again. You learn some basic sentences and expressions you can immediately use, like "How are you?" or "I would like to...". Then you learn grammar and you build sentences. After some time you can possibly add two sentences to one to make a composite sentence, and after some weeks you can express yourself, talk to people, and find your way in a foreign country. It is all about repeating, copying, and combining. In the end it is about putting everything together in an intuitive way to express your own content. That is how to learn a language, and learning visual language is similar to learning "verbal" language, with one difference: Since everyone intuitively recognizes and understands the meaning of common iconography, we start our first iteration with all the "passive vocabulary" we need.

The clue is: you don't need to invent your own words to express your-self. Just learn how to pronounce and use the existing vocabulary and grammar in your personal way and for your individual purpose. Visual language, like Bob Horn suggests, consists of and is about using vocabulary (text, graphics, and pictures), grammar, and rhetoric in a conscious way. Martin Eppler, a Swiss researcher at St. Gallen University, even claims "visual literacy" is crucial for modern management today.

In our classes people learn in two days to design something that looks great, that they can use for their work, they did in a pleasant and sheltered learning atmosphere. Team building in our training is very essential. We get everyone's voices in the room, we ask people to communicate and collaborate. Sometimes we also ask people to draw on one poster together to make it a team experience.

Anyway, I think most of our success is the right choreography to design a training as a learning process that offers an appropriate combination of logic and systematic rules, free flow of trying out, alternations between deductive and inductive learning strategies, appreciative evaluation of participants' results, and free space to visually work on their own topics close to their hearts. At this point I have to praise my colleague Karina Antons who leads the trainer team and develops didactics and methodologies for both basic and advanced formats. She is the one to empower trainers with the ability to find out about their own trainer

personality, in order to quickly establish a good resonance with the group and intuitively set the path for both group and individual learning by iterative loops in a sheltered surrounding.

B: The discipline with drawing proper shapes and working within rules really resonates with me. It's strong because it's systematic. And you cultivate a fun team atmosphere where everyone can celebrate their successes. Where do you find people resisting your process and how do you respond to it?

M: Usually we don't experience any resistance to our approach. But sometimes people say their results don't look like that way they want it to be. That is why we usually have two trainers in the room, to give people personal guidance and encouragement. The best way to empower people is to encourage them. I have an American friend. He can't draw a proper line. But he loves to draw, because he found out he can express his ideas in his keynotes without being a great craftsman, but he knows that he receives standing ovations when he proudly says: "Even with a poor quality of my line I can deliver my ideas and insights, and I love to do it." Visualization is, like Ben Shneiderman says, not about making pictures, but about creating insight. Communicating good ideas needs inspiration and a little bit of self-confidence, not perfect pen strokes.

In our training, it's a lot about personal care and to help people discover the individual abilities they have. Many participants have a great ability of listening and synthesis, but lack of techniques for creating visual metaphors. There are great artists that can immediately draw graphic novels, but they can't synthesize what they hear. So everyone needs to build upon his individual potential and learn different thing to become a professional visual facilitator. Very important to us is also that our participants join the training because they are fascinated and inspired by the possibilities of visual language, not because their boss likes visualization. So, they take self-responsibility for their learning success.

B: When you give a custom workshop, you teach 10 to 15 icons for that group. Is that sort of a standard set or do you modify them depending on the industry you're working with?

M: There are some icons which are universal to us, no matter if we work with an insurance company, or an NGO within social development in Africa, or education or whatever. Usually people are happy if they have easy-to-draw imagery for abstract concepts like analysis, innovation,

development, or finance. Everybody also needs to draw people showing interaction and emotions in different situations. This imagery is pretty universal. About three quarters of our basic visual vocabulary is happily used by everyone. Anyway, an insurance company would possibly need more graphs and diagrams and an education center would rather draw team situations with people and emotions.

Whatever industry we are working with—it's always about sharing knowledge, improving processes, enhancing communication and facilitating collaboration.

Something that always struck me: Managers of a caterpillar construction company often don't want to draw caterpillars, because they actually don't work with the product itself, which I think is a sad thing. They are interested in visualizing software, process, optimization, and other abstract management concepts. So the pictograms that we usually use are set at a management level, and management is usually not into the details of their tangible products—they deal with making visual the things that are invisible.

Another important thing I have found out: The people that drive the caterpillar don't need visualization because they can show the caterpillar mechanic, "Look here at the bottom of this engine, there is this screw that needs to be fixed." On the other hand, people that work with intangible things, like optimizing caterpillar production lines in floor shop management—they need a lot of visualization because they find it difficult to express themselves properly.

That is the reason why I think visualization is the 21st-century tool for knowledge-based societies.

B: *Can you share an example of how a group developed their own iconography?*

M: In every training, new icons that can go into our visual vocabulary are invented.

I recently worked with a crisis management group program. If something terrible happens—like a terror attack or a building burning down—they get together to respond. They asked us to train people to be visual facilitators in their meetings.

First, we shared very easy visuals they could draw quickly. Here are some elements that were important to this group:
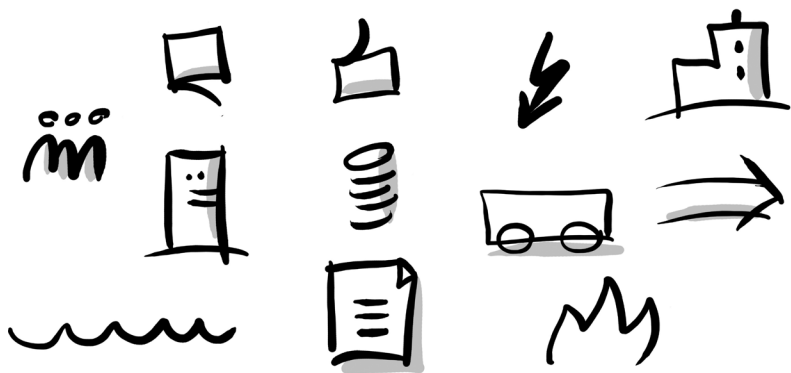
After refining and practicing those, we began combining these icons in new ways to visualize quick status reports: At 15.10 hours, the headquarter[s] is on fire, nobody knows the number of people inside. Two servers are down because of flooding, one is ok. Forty people are safe, five dead, 10 missed. Police and firemen are on site, ambulance not yet.
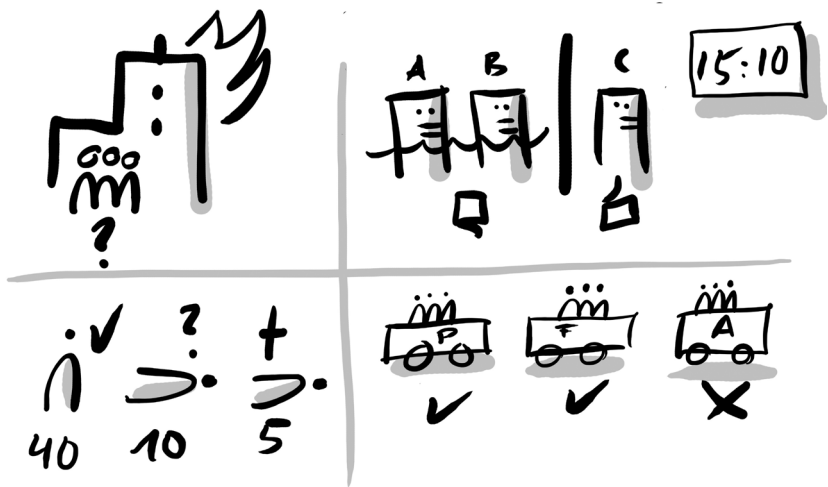
All together we created a huge set of illustrations they can continue using. With this imagery we simulated meeting situations where the visual facilitators would visualize pieces of information quickly on moderation cards and arrange them on a self-designed template.

B: *Where are you taking bikablo® akademie next?*

M: In our current basic training we empower people to develop presentation posters for professional use. Visual presentation in the sense of imparting knowledge for me is one of the three basic applications of visualization.


The second application is documentation. That is usually what graphic recorders do: to simultaneously transform the key insights, messages, or questions of a speech or dialog into a structured, coherent, and attractive design. Sketchnoting, as the "smaller brother" of graphic recording, documents for personal use as a learning technique.
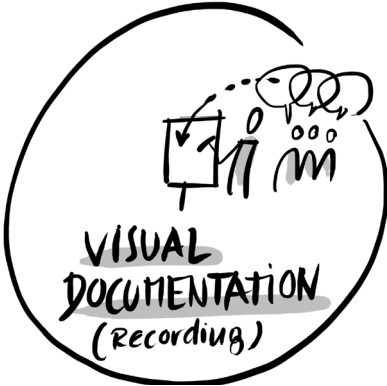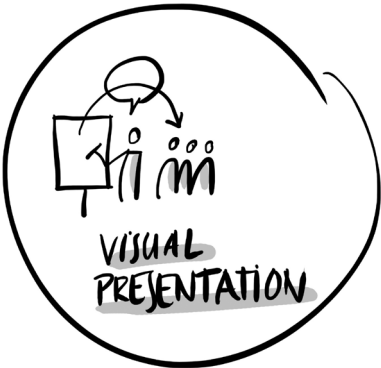
The third circle is exploring: As part of the dialog process, the visual facilitator joins the meeting and maps the dialog "at the speed of sound." For this, we are currently developing new styles, techniques, and methodologies of dialog facilitation and visualization in the cross section with group interventions like storytelling, design thinking, or appreciative inquiry.
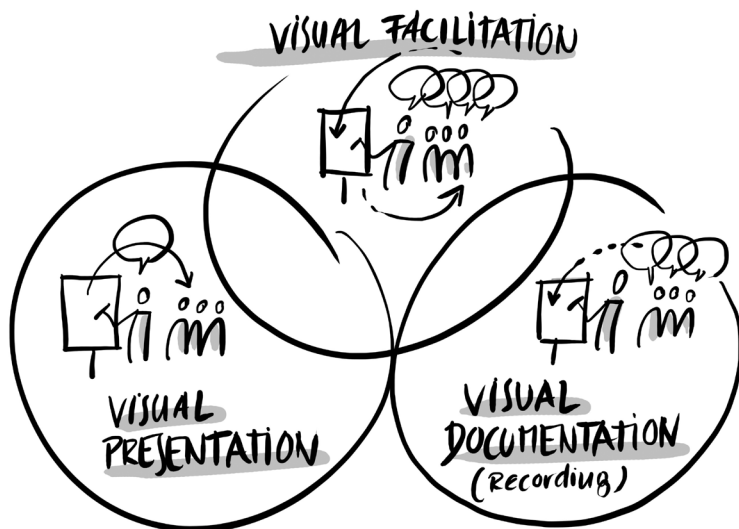
In the end, my vision is to get everyone in a room grabbing a pen and mapping the things they are talking about: visual co-creation. For that, we simplify our existing techniques further, making it even more easy to use the pen as a real dialog and thinking tool, also on the whiteboard or on digital devices. Visualize your ideas immediately, develop together, and reflect and create a iterative common understanding of your project. Beyond that, we're setting up methodologies of self-facilitation—to have every voice in the room and ask the right questions at the right moment in diverging and converging process phases and ensure the conversation and the picture are working fluidly together in a process.
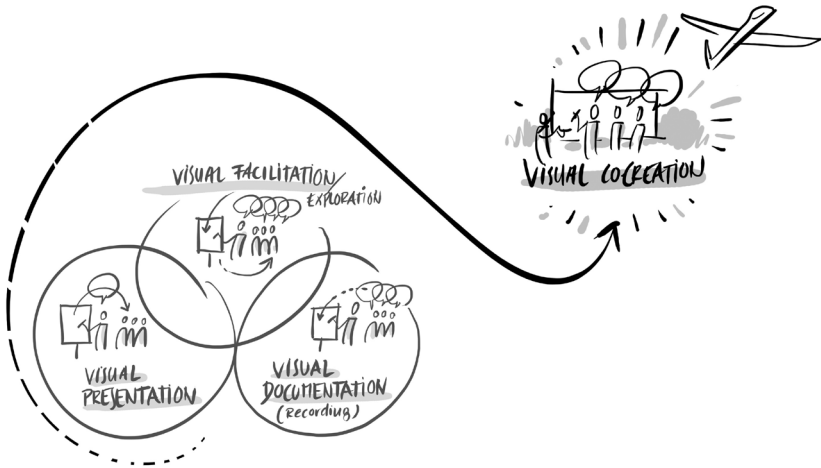
In this understanding, visualization is not a product any more, it is a temporary blueprint for the next iteration, an ongoing process from making the product to being part of the process again. We return to the iterative loops and the dynamics that make the glider soar.

MARTIN HAUSSMANN is a visual facilitator, author, and trainer. He is the executive director of the bikablo® akademie for visual thinking, a 20-person-trainer team that empowers more than 2,500 people per year to think with the pen. As author and inventor of the bikablo® visualization technique he publishes bestselling visual dictionaries and tools under the bikablo® brand, distributed by Neuland.

After being a graphic design and illustration freelancer, Martin started the graphic recorder and visual facilitator team of the German organizational consultancy Kommunikationslotsen in 2006. Today his passion is exploring new techniques, models, and methods for developing and systemizing visual facilitation. Alongside his work in the field of visual thinking, he performs live theater using a self-designed system of hacked overhead projectors. He lives with his wife and son in Cologne, Germany.