Rich picturing

Group exploration is critical to resolving wicked problems. It enhances ownership by the stakeholders and enables communication between them, which in turn reinforces ownership even more. It also provides a space for eliciting tacit knowledge, which may prove essential for re-solving the situation. Representing problem complexity graphically is an effective method for ensuring the fullest possible participation. Rich pictures have been widely used for this purpose. They are perhaps best known as the first step of Soft Systems Methodology, developed by Peter Checkland in the late

Rich picture of the Working for Water Programme in South Africa (adapted from Martin Reynolds, OU, UK)

1980s[1]. They are used in many organisational development and action learning approaches as well as in counselling.

Rich pictures are well suited for depicting complex situations and their relation with the wider environment. They encapsulate the situation by describing the structures, processes and inter-relationships, but also issues, conflicts, agreements and resources (e.g., people, money, tools, skills). They are hand-drawn and do not require artistic talent. People are often drawn as stick figures, relations as arrows. Labels and text balloons are added to clarify the meaning.

A rich picture can cope with any sort of chaos. It happily receives whatever chaotic mess of thoughts and perceptions pours down your arm from your brain, out of the pen in your hand and onto the page. In the end, a rich picture can be quite messy and confusing in the eyes of a person who was not present during its making. This should not put anybody off from drawing them. Often, the messiest pictures are the richest and most meaningful.

The important thing to understand is that you are ***not*** drawing a system. In fact you are doing the opposite. You are drawing the unstructured messiness of the situation that will allow you later to think systemically about that situation. Rich pictures are a means for moving from a state of messy confusion, where all you know is that you're dealing with a problematic situation, to a state where you've identified one or more themes that as a group or individual you want to address. These themes are then refined and defined as systems of interest for further exploration (see Steps 2 and 3).

Drawing a rich picture

Ideally, the first thing to do is to recruit a bunch of people with different perspectives on the situation and bring them together in some way. But you may also do it on your own. It just risks being less 'rich'.

Once you've gathered whoever is going to work on this, you will then need a large sheet of paper and some felt tip pens, perhaps also a block of Post-Its.

The big question that worries everyone when starting to draw a rich picture is where to start.

Here's one way. Thinking about the situation or issue, write on separate Post-Its (in all, maybe 20–50):

- Who or what are the key stakeholder roles?
- What are the key stakes (e.g., purposes, motivations, values, norms, aspirations, goals)?

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1   See the later chapter Further Readings for various references to Checkland's work.

Now place them on the paper in a way that allows you to display the structure of the inter-relationships of stakes and stakeholders within the situation. Once you are happy with the overall configuration, you can remove the Post-Its one by one and start drawing to show:

- the processes between elements of that structure;
- the nature of the inter-relationships (e.g., strong, weak, fast, slow, conflicted, collaborative, direct, indirect);
- important aspects of the situation that affect how the stakeholders, stakes, structures and processes interact. Things like:
- purposes, aspirations, and goals;
- motivations;
- values and norms;
- environmental aspects, e.g., a climate of opinion;
- issues, conflicts, and agreements;
- resources (e.g., people, money, tools, skills);
- things you don't know or puzzle you.

Other tips and suggestions[2]

Before you start give your situation a title (e.g., micro-beer distribution in Uganda). For a start it helps draw a boundary around your task, but if you are doing this with others it allows at least an initial conversation. However, **do not phrase it as a problem, a goal or a question** (e.g., how can I get decent beer from Kampala to Entebbe?). Rich pictures are actually trying to stop you rushing too quickly to a problem statement or solution.

It is very important to convey all the important elements of a situation without overly imposing your own understanding and prejudices. Indeed, rich pictures are drawn before you know clearly which parts of a situation you should be focusing on. We often hear about people rushing to solutions. Well, it is equally a problem rushing too quickly to define the problem. Therefore, free your mind as much as possible from any preconceived ideas you may have about the situation. Too many try to place too much order too quickly into a situation. In contrast, a rich picture displays as much of the situation as possible.

For many the value of rich pictures is only revealed once they start using them with others, perhaps in a group. Looking at what different people in the same group contribute, and then comparing pictures between groups, is an effective way of revealing these differences because they express things you wouldn't think of saying. And sometimes they allow you to say in a simple and unthreatening way things that may have seemed rude or frivolous to articulate. They can also help you to see things you might otherwise have missed: connections, traps, possibilities, contradictions, and so on.

If you are working in a group, there's one important rule. Use only one drawing implement! Otherwise you get half a dozen small unconnected rich pictures being drawn, and it also forces conversation. Generally speaking just encourage people to start ─ you will be surprised how quickly people get into the spirit. However, a New Zealand colleague of ours, Judy Oakden, makes the perceptive comment that rich picture drawing works best when the group has 'formed'. In other words, it isn't a good warm-up exercise. The group needs to work out its dynamic, decide what might be confidential, and identify who knows what and whom. It is even a good idea to show some examples of rich pictures and go through the Open University rich picture building exercise described at the end of this chapter. She finds it best to have people just talk in a guided or facilitated way for a while rather than filling out cards and pinning them on the wall. If this is well

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2   Drawing extensively from http://systems.open.ac.uk/materials/T552/pages/rich/richAppendix.html

facilitated it helps the group move more quickly into the areas they don't understand or puzzle them. It also helps establish the group dynamic.

People will possibly feel uncomfortable and uncertain during the process. It can be hard to face other people's often surprisingly different assumptions, because this make us question our own assumptions. This can be demanding and unsettling. It can mean throwing away the solutions we thought we had, going back to the beginning and starting afresh. But that's often exactly what is needed at the start of a systemic inquiry. So reassure them that these feelings are normal during the process, but it will be worth their while

People may feel overwhelmed when they have finished the picture, again reassure them this is normal. Part of this sense is because they think that taking a systems approach means they have to take everything in the rich picture into account. This is where you can remind them that the systems approach is about being very smart about what to leave out rather than what to put in.

Do's and don'ts

It is essential that every line drawn between two elements has an explanation attached to it. Otherwise you have no idea what the line actually means, or how powerful it is, how much agreement there is, what is carried by the inter-relationship. Also avoid double headed arrows, since inter-relationships are rarely equal. Draw and describe two lines instead.

Don't have the piece of paper too big. Two sheets of flip chart paper taped together is usually enough.

Make sure that your picture includes not only the factual data about the situation, but also the subjective information. You need to show all that you perceive as problematic or significant emotions and relationships as well as groupings and connections of various sorts.

Look at the social roles that are regarded within the situation as meaningful by those involved, and look at the kinds of behaviour expected from people in those roles. If you see any conflicts, indicate them.

Do 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.

Do not think in systems terms as in, "Well, the situation is made up of a marketing system and a production system and a quality control system." There are two reasons for this. The first is that the word 'system' implies organised interconnections and it may be precisely the absence of such organised interconnectedness that lies at the heart of the matter; therefore, by assuming its existence (by the use of the word system) you may be missing the point. Note, however, that this does not mean that there won't be some sort of link or connection between your graphics, as mentioned above. The second reason is that doing so will channel you down a particular line of thought, namely the search for ways of making these systems more efficient.

If you are working as a group be aware of any politics and power dynamics.

Finally, don't be put off by the idea of drawing a picture. Most books that use rich picturing display nice, neat, well-honed pictures that create the idea that you need to be an artist to do it properly. In contrast figure 3.2 is a rich picture that is wonderfully messy and inartistic yet still useful. It describes a water-use issue in New Zealand. Below are some examples (and you can judge how well they follow the rules)[3]

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3   Ann Winstanley, Virginia Baker, Jeff Foote, Jan Gregor, Wendy Gregory, Maria Hepi, Gerald Midgley (2005)
     Water in the Waimea Basin: Community Values and Water Management Options. A Report by ESR for the Waimea
     Water Augmentation Committee and the Tasman District Council.

Climate Change

Global Warming · Greenhouse Gas ↑

Precipitation

Social Change — Collapse of Soviet Union

Arctic Sea Ice Extent ↓ · Teleconnection from lower latitud

Cyclone Activity ↑

Permafrost → River Flood

Maintenance ↓

Infrastructure

Public Network ↓
Governmental Subsidy ↓

Ecosystem

Animal Resources · Predatory Animal ↑↓

Spring Flood ↑ (1998 ~ ↑)
adaptable (cattle-horse keeping; pasture) (local knowledge · communication
unadaptable (submergence of house) (local knowledge · feel horrible)
Adaptation strategy ⇐ started !! (seasonal migration)

Social Change — Economy-oriented Generation Gap

Wild Reindeer ↑↓
Domestic Reindeer ↓

Local Knowledge ↓
Motivation ↓

Economic Growth ↑

Adaptation strategy (hunting capability) (protected grounds) (governmental subsidy) (community consciousness)

Summer Flood ↑ (2008, 2012)
unadaptable (no experience, no local knowledge)
Adaptation strategy (information transmission) (feed-hay distribution networks)

Rich Pictures : The energy debate

Government · Spectre of Maggie · TARZAN
depressed community · collective guilt
views on privatisation · views on energy
legislative framework
NUM · UDM
cheapest deep mined coal in europe
OPEN CAST? · NATIONAL COAL BOARD · contracts
ENERGY PROVIDERS
electricity boards - distributors
power & influence
- gas turbine technology
- green and clean
Directors
policy
Subsidy · nuclear electric
generators
PG · NP
GAS strategic? generating wasteful?
France
Foreign sources of coal and gas supply :
- cheap
- exploited labour?
- reliability : political stability cost long term?