

The Writings On The Wall – Process Art: Building Relationships and a New Multimedia Center.

How the Digital Clubhouse was born.

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We've all heard it before and perhaps now more than ever, "everything old is new again"; the same could be said for Process Art.

Over 40,000 years ago, cave dwellers created wall paintings illustrating critical elements of their hunt for the great Woolly Mammoth. Cave dwellers understood that these drawings would allow them to visualize the vital steps needed to create their success prior to actually going out and gaining the sustenance needed to survive. Process Art, also known as Graphic Facilitation, is a creativity tool that elevates this ancient form of visual communication to new levels. Some have said that Process Art is like an engine driving the generation of new ideas and strategies.

How Process Art Works

Quite possibly, the greatest asset of Process Art is its simplicity. Via the use of imagery, color, icons, distance, shapes and metaphor, Process Art creates a cohesive visual representation of thoughts and ideas, illustrated in real-time, harvested from individuals participating in group meetings.

The result is the creation of what I like to call a "Modern Day Wall Painting."

Process Art, however, is much more than just a way to present ideas and capture concepts. After 12 years of utilizing Process Art involving more than 1,500 programs, I have discovered its true value extends beyond an ability to illustrate ideas in real-time. Perhaps more importantly, Process Art has been shown to be an effective tool to enhance individuals' involvement and interest. Process Art stimulates participants involved in group environments to contribute and expand their thinking by the illustration of their thoughts and ideas in real time on large pieces of butcher paper.

Boosting the creative thinking of participants is always a challenge in any environment. While there are many powerful techniques being employed by organizations all over the world, Process Art has proven itself to be unequalled in its ability to tap the vein that motivates people to generate new and innovative ideas on just about any subject.

Boosting The Creative IQ

Integrating Process Art into a traditional meeting setting creates non-traditional results by stimulating thinking and talking. Nuggets of hidden meaning become identifiable from the ideas illustrated during the discussion, frequently uncovering hidden keys – such as those that drive the success of marketing programs and product development.

One of the best ways to understand how organizations can benefit by utilizing Process Art is to review a case history of an organization I co-founded. The Digital Clubhouse Network, a community based multimedia digital learning center, targeting technologically disenfranchised consumer and business segments, was conceived, developed and refined through information obtained via extensive user group gatherings that employing Process Art. I Graphically Facilitated all sessions leading to the development and refinement of The Digital Clubhouse Network model. Here is the Digital Clubhouse story.

Case History: The Digital Clubhouse Network

In 1995, before the widespread acceptance of multimedia into virtually all segments of world culture, The NASA Ames Research Center, seed funded an ambitious endeavor to accelerate the development of networked multimedia technology and applications.

One of the primary outcomes of NASA's activities was The Digital Clubhouse Network – a new kind of digital learning center. The Digital Clubhouse Network was formed for the purpose of creating innovative ways of using the power of networked multimedia to develop stronger communities among consumer and business segments of the population who were technologically disenfranchised at that time – youth, seniors, teachers, women, the disabled and small business owners.

Envisioning The Future

These diverse segments were targeted based on the belief that they would gain the most from their full participation in a networked multimedia world. The use of Process Art was instrumental in harvesting new knowledge from those in the target segments.

Specifically, the Process Art facilitated programs were charged with the mission of obtaining concise and clear profiles of the complex relationships that exist between technology and human emotions and desires.

The research program consisted of several phases – initial intelligence gathering, assessment of potential offerings and refinements. Process Art played a key role in each phase.

In the initial intelligence-gathering phase, some 25 Process Art implemented mini groups (3-5 participants), focus groups (8-11 participants) and maxi group sessions (15-25 participants) across the diverse market segments being studied were conducted.

Output from these sessions included a series of Process Art murals representing real-time documentation of participants' thoughts, emotions and ideas. In essence, each mural represented the "detailed findings" harvested from each session.

Chuck Castellano, the senior NASA official assigned to oversee program, said: *"The use of Process Art creates an environment where people feel heard, are able to listen to one another, and, in the moment, see a work of art unfold which reflects a shared vision and strong sense of community which they have created together."*

The individual "detailed findings" murals illustrated during the 25 intelligence gathering sessions were summarized on one cohesive visual representation and action plan mural. Thereby, creating a "management summary" of the finding and recommendations.

Process Art was the perfect vehicle to clearly and simply illustrate the complex thoughts and emotions obtained from the wide variety of constituencies.

Crossing The Digital Divide

During the second phase of the program – assessment of potential offerings – concepts and prototypes of specific new program ideas were developed and evaluated. Among the more than 50 new product ideas conceived and tested *Producing the Producers, Webucation, Cousins of the Clubhouse, Project DigitallyAble*, and *Youth Enterprise Zone* are examples of those that were eventually introduced.

Once again, Process Art played a critical role in the evaluation of each potential offering. Specifically, new product offerings "visions" were visually presented via a Process Art mural that was displayed to participants. These "Process Art Vision Murals" provided all the information that would have been typically written in an executive summary or presented via a Power Point. The Vision Murals answered the questions of: What? Why? and How? for each potential program. The murals were used as stimuli during the sessions.

Development of Groundbreaking New Product Ideas

One of the cornerstones of the Digital Clubhouse Network is the building of community via the expansion of the knowledge and skills acquired at the Clubhouse. Towards that end, those participating in the program are required to teach others the networked multimedia skills they acquired at the Clubhouse.

Producing the Producers was designed to provide ordinary people with an opportunity to see themselves as filmmakers, visionaries, and technologists. Participants in this program included cross-generational groups – seniors, teachers, youth, women, and the “differently-abled.” The program empowered participants to produce, write, direct and star in a short digital autobiographic movie. People opened their hearts and their photo albums to create short multimedia documentary style digital stories depicting important events in their lives. In the words of many involved, the result of this program is “magical.”

During the refinement of the Producing the Producers program “beta tests” were run. These tests allowed individuals to actually produce their digital stories. Before completing their stories, beta testers participated in a Process Art lead group discussion to share ideas and emotions about their experience. This learning process supported the development and refinement of the program as well as identifying new opportunities.

One of my personal favorite programs I was able to develop and lead by Process Art, is Project DigitallyAble. Targeting “differently-abled” individuals, this program included elementary school aged children with Down Syndrome, young adults with severe physical disabilities, adults with MS, the hearing and or sight impaired, as well as Dyslexics. The objective of this program was to equip these individuals with the skills necessary to effectively participate in the mainstream of the emerging Digital Age. An example of a successful application of this program was the creation of a “digital resume,” designed to enhance employment opportunities.

Reflecting back on what has been created, it was a uniquely rewarding experience to have been part of and contribute to the creation of The Digital Clubhouse Network. Today, standing the test of time, almost seven years since the initial Process Art implemented user groups were undertaken, branches of the Digital Clubhouse Network continue operating. You can find a Digital Clubhouse at 55 Broad Street in the Financial District of Lower Manhattan and in the Heart of Silicon Valley at the Sunnyvale Town Center, California.

To this day, The Clubhouse remains true to its original purpose and charter of building community and serving the needs of individuals taking part in its programs and services. Many of which were initially developed from the information and insight harvested from the Process Art implemented user group programs conducted in 1995 - 1996.

A New Way of Thinking

One of our prime objectives in writing this article is to share my experiences with as many people as possible. The benefits of Process Art that I share have been learned from projects conducted on behalf of Corporations, Universities, Entrepreneurs, Not-for-profit organizations, as well as marketers and strategists. Moreover, personal experiences gained as a result of graphically facilitating more than one thousand Process Art programs provides me with a unique vantage point.

Breaking Out of The Box

Process Art is powerful. I believe it can be a valuable enhancement to any group gathering or meeting environment. If you do not feel comfortable doing Process Art yourself, there are professional Process Art graphic facilitators who are skilled and experienced.

At the same time, do not dismiss Process Art because you "can't draw a straight line." Remember, it was Picasso who said, "We are all born artists the challenge is staying one." A few simple and easily learned icons, some straightforward templates, a large piece of paper and a pallet of colored magic markers (I prefer scented markers, for that extra kick of creativity) can add a great deal of creative power and effectiveness to your next meeting.

Like I always say during the introduction warm-up of our Process Art facilitated sessions: "I promise you three things. You'll have a good time. You've never seen anything like this before. And, you know more than you know you know!"