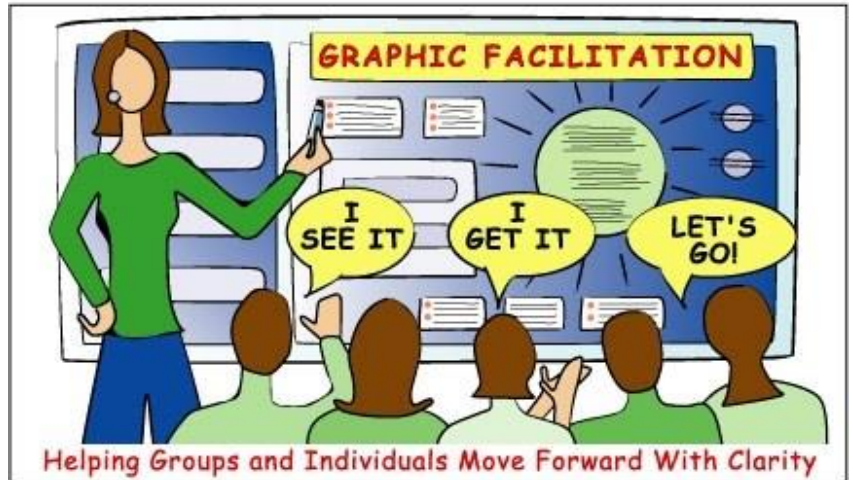# The HISTORY and EVOLUTION of the
GRAPHIC FACILITATION / RECORDING FIELD

grăpĥ'ĭc, a. (-cally) (date:1637) of drawing, painting, etching, &c.;vividly descriptive; of writing; of symbolic curves &c.

făcĭl`ĭtâte v.t. *(-itable)* (date:1619) , make easy, promote, (action, result) făcĭl'ĭtā/tion, facĭl'ĭtātor, nn. facĭl'ĭtỳ n., absence of difficulty; fluency, dexterity; (usu.pl.) opportunity (for).

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Where DID This Way of Working Come From?
What ARE the Historical Roots of This Field?

At the dawn of this new millennium, there is a growing field of 'visual practitioners' moving steadily across the international landscape. Comprised of people calling themselves graphic facilitators, graphic recorders, visual synthesizers, mapmakers and the like … these people are all using visual approaches with varying levels of interaction to assist groups and individuals in thinking, communicating, sharing and making decisions.

This article is an attempt to answer the question of **"Where DID this way of working come from? What ARE the historical roots of your field?"** Questions that I get asked as I go about my work in my own graphic facilitation and graphic coaching practice. I've pulled my answers from the literature that exists in the field as well as from personal contacts and interviews I've had with various colleagues and some of the early innovators. This is one person's admittedly North American-centric view, not to be taken as gospel, but hopefully a useful orientation and context tool nonetheless.

Ancient History of the Arts:

"Graphic Recorders are modern-day cave artists, visionaries, scribes, teachers, learners, illuminators and historians … all keepers of the precious written word and imaginings of voices and hearts. Our practice has roots in ancient traditions of paying attention, reflecting, recording and 'remembering for the future'. We help bring ideas forward, help collaboration, help direct the 'light' to the individual and the collective wisdom in this world."

Leslie Salmon-Zhu, as quoted by Mary Brake in her "Making the Magic Happen" article, Facilitation News, Spring 99

The first beginning sketches of a recording.

The history of the use of visuals or graphics in settings where people gather together is an ancient one, borne out by the hieroglyphics and cave drawings of old. For eons, human beings have tapped into the enormous power of drawing to communicate. The cliché "a picture is worth a thousand words" is a cliché for a simple reason: its true! And, if a picture is worth a thousand words, then a visual metaphor is worth a thousand pictures!

Few things communicate feeling, tone, and directive as much as a well-composed image loaded with shared meaning and sub-text. Imagery as a communication aid worked for our early ancestors and it continues to work for us now in our modern world. In fact, with the rise of modern technology, the simple hand-drawn graphic can bring a measure of calm and humanity that is sorely needed in our fast-paced, hyper computerized world. Adding a 'high touch' element to a high tech world.

"Since Gutenberg and the onset of typewriters, publishing houses, and telecommunications, the job of providing cultural group memories and preserving core imagery has widened into an industry. In historical terms, we are now at a point where information itself has become such a vast frontier that charting a path across it, or reflecting that path for another, is a dizzying task. People are in great need of tools, technologies and frameworks for thinking which can hold information faithfully and facilitate its assimilation for successful applications."

David Sibbet, A Brief History of Group Visuals, I See What You Mean

A Strategic Visioning Facilitation

The Embryonic Environment:
San Francisco Bay Area in the 1960 and 70s

The modern use of a visual approach to assist learning and group interactions heated up in the San Francisco Bay Area during the mid-1960s and 70s. This area was a rich, intellectual environment where people from many different fields were breaking through to different levels of thought and understanding: architecture, film, social change theorists, the beginnings of computing and artificial intelligence – all sorts of people in this area were working on ways to help human beings learn and interact together more effectively.

In the late 1970s facilitation itself began to emerge as a field out of the arbitration, mediation and negotiation arenas as the need for impartial leaders of group process (facilitators) became more and more apparent.

Michael Doyle and Peter Strauss, former architects, launched their Interaction Associates (IA) consultancy and wrote the seminal 'yellow bible' for the budding facilitation field, called How To Make Meetings Work. Their work was stimulated by research being funded in the education and social change realms, particularly a project called Tools for Change sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation and creativity work conducted by Stanford Research Institute (SRI).

At the heart of Doyle & Strauss' work, they advocated the creation of 'facilitator' and 'recorder' teams to manage the personal dynamics and thinking of groups. Believing that people learned best when facilitated to focus on one thing at a time and working on it in a logical sequence, they pushed for the creation of extensive visual documentation, which they called 'group memory':

> **"The human brain is essentially a massive parallel processor. But for a group to work together, the group brain needs to be a serial processor. The group memory is the consciousness thread that is used to keep the group focused on working on one thing, and working on it in a logical sequence. Group memory is the stuff you post on the walls or otherwise collect where everyone can see it. It is where you keep all comments, ideas, discussion, agreements, thoughts, votes and decisions, so each person can see what we're talking about now."**

Group Memory: How to Make Meetings Work, Doyle& Strauss

At the time that Doyle & Strauss had set up shop in San Francisco, several other early pioneers were experimenting with the merits of visual approaches. Geoff Ball and Doug Englebart of SRI had been years into a project examining 'explicit group memory'. Another former architect, Joe Brunon, created an approach called 'Generative Graphics' and an art and philosophy student from Stanford,

Fred Lakin, began creating tools to assist the new visual experimentations (peg boards, magic marker holders, and a wall scroll that supported up to 16 feet of large butcher block paper … Lakin eventually moves into telephone and web facilitation technologies later in his career).

Jim Channon was pioneering provocative work within the U.S. Army with his First Earth Battalion. Matt and Gail Taylor (life partners from architecture and education) of MGTaylor, Corp. would pioneer a network of creativity-focused management centers across the globe for Ernst & Young (in which 'group genius' would emerge through the help of artists within their teams).

Group Graphics® Is Born:

In the midst of this creative vortex, a young new face arrived on the scene to become the training director of a public affairs leadership program called CORO just down the hall from IA's San Francisco office. David Sibbet, a journalist grad with an artistic flair, was taken with IA's methods and was inspired one afternoon to borrow Fred Larkin's wall scroll to map out a city-wide picture of the internship experiences his students were having throughout San Francisco. Instead of sticking to IA's smaller, 2-foot wide strips of paper, Sibbet went for the larger panorama, and in the process, inadvertently spawned a new way of working!

From that first exciting afternoon, Sibbet caught the 'Group Graphics' bug (in fact "Group Graphics" is a registered trademark of Sibbet's, although there is some debate as to who first coined the term). He continued to learn from the researchers around him and to explore with his students, eventually in 1980 holding his first public workshop (co-lead with Sandra Florstedt and Geoff Ball). (See Sibbet's Retrospective Article for more detailed information about his take on the field and on the early influences).

> **"Sibbet recognized that the power of group memory could be increased substantially by adding a specialized set of icons or graphic images to the structure sketch. Sibbet, who had both strong artistic and conceptual abilities, developed a series of templates that could be used to structure ideas".**

Geoff Ball, former SRI Explicit Group Memory Researcher

Another visual innovator, who was steadily active during this period, although across the ocean in England, was Tony Buzan, the creator of Mind-mapping. Buzan's method combats the linear; left-brain education system that has taught to start in the upper left-hand corner of a page … his method begins in the center instead, and works the human brain's natural tendency to organize things in branching patterns.

The 80s Consulting Boom:

It appears that the facilitation field experienced a boom brought on in the 1980s by a need in corporations and government agencies to get large numbers of employees working together more effectively. The resulting consulting explosion was a boon for the fledging graphic facilitation niche as well.

Large Meeting Graphic Recording
Photo courtesy of Lynn Carruthers, GBN

Interaction Associates, who helped create and define the facilitation sphere, were now actively employed throughout the globe --- pulling together large recording teams to assist in their endeavors. By the end of the decade a collection of graphic recorders was created, both employed within IA and as independent contractors, who were teamed with I.A. facilitators.

Interactive Graphic Facilitation (Photo courtesy of Greg Gollagher)

The Grove Consultants (then called Graphic Guides, Inc) were continuing to piece together their visual methods. David Sibbet's publishing efforts increased as he created the Group Graphics Keyboard and other materials to support his Group Graphics Workshops. These workshops were steadily attracting external and internal consultants, trainers, and facilitators. He and his colleagues also moved beyond the early 'graphic recording' aspects of the work, and began creating and providing more sophisticated facilitation, consulting and group services and tools, including a collaboration on The Team Performance Model with Allan Drexler. Through the Grove's work, and the work of the people they trained and worked with, the visual methods were beginning a steady infiltration into corporate, not-for-profit and even government ranks.

At this same time, tucked in the American military, was another visual pioneer, Jim Channon … who was using imagining techniques and multi-dimensional displays to interpret and communicate complex information before computers could do it. Helping to draw out the big picture of different operations and to communicate plans to different levels of command. Jim and his internal military colleagues were also influencing, training and creating innovative visual methods for their own unique purposes. Many

of these folks spread their techniques throughout the military and into post-service private sector careers.

The 1990s: The 100th Monkey Syndrome

Vision and Values Work

Recording of Product Development Session
Photo courtesy of Leslie Evers

By the 1990s, graphic recording and graphic facilitation methodologies really began to multiple and take off. Like the urban myth about the 100th Monkey Syndrome (how ALL monkeys on a remote island magically began washing their sweet potatoes after the 100th monkey adopted the habit) … the visual way of working appears to have hit its own version of Moore's law … doubling, tripling, quadrupling its reach and effect every couple of years. Now 20 years or so into its evolution, the field really began to make inroads into traditional and non-traditional settings. The early work of the pioneers was bearing fruit. In their own practices and in the practices and organizations of those they helped train and inspire.

Even the more conventional big consulting / accounting firms were getting into the act … since 1995, the consulting giant Cap Gemini Ernst & Young has built special facilities to capitalize on this tool in 10 cities in North America, 5 in Europe and even one in Australia. Their centers pool creative change management, strategic planning, visioning, facilitation, illustration, computing and tech solution specialists together in exciting ways for their large, and deep-pocketed clients.

Back in the San Francisco Bay Area, at the grassroots level, a different sort of collection energy was happening. Two graphic recorders from the early IA days, Leslie Salmon-Zhu and Susan Kelly were lamenting how they never got to see one another and swap trade secrets due to the solo nature of their work. Frustrated by the lack of a community forum, these two women rallied themselves, and others, to create a solution.

In 1995, the first informal gathering of 'visual practitioners' occurred … drawing 17 graphic recorders and facilitators to a ranch in Northern California. Since that time the gathering has grow to 100+core members and has become an annual conference. In 2000 The International Forum of Visual Practitioners (IFVP) became an official association, led by a rotating, volunteer Board. The Board manages the annual conference, maintains the website and hosts online exchanges via a growing distribution list.

Technological, Publishing and Relationship Advancements:

Technology development has had a big impact on the graphics field. First, being spanned in San Francisco, the early field grew as its Silicon Valley counterparts grew. Many of the field's first and lasting clients have been technology companies like National Semi Conductor, HP and Apple. Much of the advancement of the field follows the boom (and bust, and boom) of the tech sector.

The second way that technology has impacted the graphics field has been in the actual physical technology that visual practitioners use to document and distribute their visual medium. In the very early days, it was not uncommon for pioneers like Sibbet to have to redraw their large displays, by hand, into smaller scale renditions, which would be photocopied and mailed to participants. Eventually large photo-stat cameras were employed to take photographs of the wall size originals (but these huge machines were only available in the largest metropolitan centers).

The field remained hampered by cumbersome, time consuming and expensive post-meeting reproduction methods until cheaper and more user-friendly alternative emerged in the mid to late 90s … in the form of digital cameras and photo-editing programs, as well as large scale printers and scanners.   This new technology was instantly revolutionary for this field. Enabling many smaller size operations to do the work that only collectives with in-house studios were previously able to do.

A documentation service business Landau Art has also emerged in recent years to service the needs of this specialized field.

The adaptive influence of technology continues to make its mark on this field as several firms integrate multi-media platforms into their sophisticated web documentation, graphic planning, communication campaign, and story mapping offerings.

A publishing breakthrough occurred in this decade, in the form of pre-printed wall templates, called Graphic Guides® by The Grove Consultants. These large size forms invite those who are 'graphics shy' (thinking they aren't artistic enough to do graphic recording or graphic facilitation on their own) to bring visuals into their facilitation and group work. There are a number of processes that have been 'template-ized' by various companies into their own products line: Strategic Visioning, Scenarios, Focus Group / Product Development, Graphic Coaching, and Disaster Response. These tools have helped spread the graphics medium deep within many companies and organizations and into the toolkits of many internal and external consultants.

Another boom to graphics work during the 1990s was the development of various processes that have a graphic component to them, such as Future Search and The World Cafe. As well as the continued and evolving work of assorted design, information architecture and visual thinking theorists, including (but certainly not limited to): Bob Horn, Richard Wurman, and Edward Tufte.

## The Millennium and Beyond: The Future Looks Bright!

With the rise in email and Internet communication, our separate and seemingly independent graphic practices are becoming more linked and connected and client/consumer awareness and sophistication is dramatically increasing … type the words 'graphic recording' or 'graphic facilitation' into any search

engine and the listings increase every day. This field is growing and spreading in unique and fascinating ways at a phenomenal pace. Practices and individuals across the globe (Australia, England, Denmark, Germany, Scandinavia, United Kingdom, Canada, Taiwan) are finding out that 'hey, I'm not the only one who thinks and works in a visual manner!' Individual, creative innovators are finding out about other colleagues who have been simultaneously been feeding off of the same 'graphics gestalt' or 'graphic meme'. And clients can now browse and compare visual practitioners to more effectively shop for resources to meet their needs.

> **"A whole network of people is now involved, using graphic language as a key tool in organizational development and communication consulting, and helping to literally "draw out the best in people". We work all over the world with every kind of organization you can imagine. We work with deaf people, disabled people, philanthropists, manufacturing teams, architects, politicians, bankers, and even gardeners! Graphic language works everywhere. There is no question that we've stumbled on one of the most natural and amazing tools we have as humans."**

David Sibbet, Fundamentals of Group Graphics

<p align="center">However you slice it, the future of 'graphics' looks bright!</p>
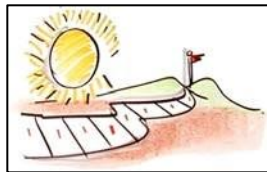
 Author Bio: Christina Merkley, M.A. is a Graphic Facilitator, Coach and Mapmaker with Make Your Mark Graphic Facilitation & Coaching. Based in San Francisco during the heyday of the 1990s, her primary focus is now on developing and promoting graphic applications in individual / coaching oriented work as well as sharing her graphics-based experience with others through workshops and mentoring. Since 2003, Christina makes her home in the in the beautiful coastal city of Victoria, British Columbia, where she invites your communications at www.makemark.com