

Markers, Metaphors, and Meaning

Drawings as a Visual and Creative Qualitative Research Methodology in Organizations

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Visual methods including drawing have historically been neglected in organizational and management research, often dismissed as “trivial, constituting decoration, insubstantial rhetoric, illusion, or at best, partially reliable information” (Davison, McClean, & Warren, 2012, p. 6). However, the use of drawing is quite common in arts-based approaches (Leavy, 2009) and research with children (Backett-Milburn & McKie, 1999; Davis, 2013; Myers, Saunders, & Garret, 2003; Sewell, 2011; Tay-Lim & Lim, 2013). Visual methods are burgeoning across disciplines (Barnhurst, Vari, & Rodriguez, 2004; Guillemin, 2004; Pain, 2012; Singhal & Rattine-Flaherty, 2006), with increasing momentum in management and organizational studies (Meyer, 1991), and with arguments that the arts are critically important for developing complex aspects of the mind (Eisner, 2002). Specifically, visual methods prove to be particularly powerful tools for examining implicit assumptions (Schyns, Tymon, Kiefer, & Kerschreiter, 2013), exploring emotionally turbulent topics (Kearney & Siegman, 2004), and understanding organizational change (Barner, 2008; Vince & Broussine, 1996).

In this chapter, we outline an innovative qualitative data collection and analytic approach that makes use of visual drawings and metaphor analysis. Metaphors—words that compare one thing (e.g., an organization) to another (e.g., a party, a competition, a prison)—provide insight into how people experience and frame their worlds. Metaphors are abundant in almost all types of textual data such as interviews, documents, and fieldnotes, yet they can be difficult for participants to identify on demand via traditional “forced metaphor” approaches. The data collection and analysis approach we outline in this chapter explains a method that asks participants in group or individual interviews to craft artistic drawings in response to researcher questions, such as “What does a leader look like?” or “What does this interagency collaboration seem like?” or “What does workplace bullying feel like?” After participants draw, they write descriptors of their drawings and, together, use those words and images to share workplace experiences.

Depending on the research goals, participants can also consider implications and groupings of other participants’ metaphors and discuss the complex interpretations that emerge (e.g., how responses might differ depending on whether participants view the bully as a “king” or a “demon”). This innovative approach provides unique empirical value and an avenue for co-creation of knowledge through participant collaboration. Furthermore, as a result of this approach, participants become engaged in the research process and are better equipped to speak about difficult and vague experiences.

Importantly, they are able to analyze how their metaphorical framings enable or constrain actions for possibility and transformation. Meanwhile, the approach lends itself to rich pedagogical activity by creating space for transformative thinking as well as a vehicle for learning inductive qualitative interpretation. Finally, researchers and readers are provided with a vivid visualization of workplace experience, which adds vibrancy to written reports.

The chapter unfolds as follows: First, we provide some background on metaphor analysis and list several examples of studies that use drawing as an innovative method of data collection and analysis. Then we offer explanations of four primary functions of this unique approach: (1) empirical value, (2) power-sharing and collaboration, (3) pedagogy, and (4) memorable representation process (as illustrated in Figure 23.1).

The Value of Metaphors

When people describe the unique value of qualitative research methodology, they often point to the ability to develop insight into how people interpret and make sense of their worlds (Tracy, 2013). However, meaning in fieldwork is frequently tacit (Altheide & Johnson, 1994). People often cannot say what is important to them or why they acted in a certain way. This is especially true when people are in the midst of change, disruption, or trauma. In such cases, participants may be unable to narrate coherent plots, scripts, scenarios, recipes, and morals. Metaphor analysis provides a valuable approach for accessing meaning in such situations.

Metaphors—words that compare one thing to another—are embedded in the way we think, communicate, and act, which impacts the way we make sense of the world (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Qualitative scholars are perfectly situated to take note of and analyze metaphors for what they say about why participants act the way they do. Metaphors are not just rhetorical, analytical, or conceptual devices, but rather are embodied and serve as embedded framing and orienting devices. In other words, metaphor *is* the cake and not just the icing—providing a linguistic link to reality and giving birth to meaning in a “world in which subjectivity and objectivity remain an indivisible whole . . . beneath the everyday linguistic patina of human interaction” (Hogler, Gross, Hartman, & Cunliffe, 2008, p. 400).

Let us illustrate by discussing a focus group study in which we were interested in understanding how people made sense of managing medicated-assisted treatment (MAT) for opiate addiction—a treatment that includes medications such as methadone to relieve dependency (Malvini Redden, Tracy, & Shafer, 2013). When we asked participants directly about their challenges, many found it difficult to articulate why they found MAT helpful or hurtful. However, we were able to assess

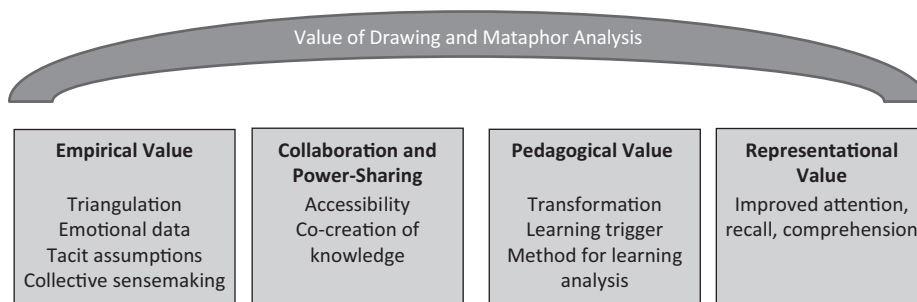


Figure 23.1 Value of Drawing and Metaphor Analysis

MAT-related challenges by analyzing the metaphors participants used to speak about their dependence. One commonly cited metaphor was that MAT was a “crutch.” The crutch metaphor illustrates that the participants viewed MAT as helping them to get by, but that it did not allow them to practice standing on their own feet. Furthermore, MAT essentially served as a symbol of sickness and weakness. Identifying and interpreting the crutch metaphor efficiently explained why our participants had mixed feelings about MAT and led us to explore linkages among language, agency, and expectations of future sobriety success. So, how do we encourage people to articulate metaphors, and what does drawing have to do with it?

Methodologies for Metaphors and Drawing

Just knowing that metaphors are valuable qualitative data is not enough to use them effectively in organizational research. Specific methods are necessary for accessing metaphors during data collection. We will review three approaches: the forced metaphor approach, the idiographic approach, and the drawing approach.

In a forced metaphor approach, the researcher directly asks participants to provide a metaphor (e.g., what does your workplace feel like?). Although efficient, this approach can be limited in its success (Sheenan, Barker, & McCarthy, 2004). Even though metaphors are ubiquitous, most people cannot spontaneously name them or tend to come up with something that is obvious or trite (e.g., this workplace is like a prison).

In contrast, an idiographic approach to metaphor collection can provide richer data because it identifies and analyzes metaphors that emerge naturally in people’s talk (Grant & Oswick, 1996). In an idiographic approach, researchers avoid specifically asking participants for metaphors, but rather review the data with an eye toward metaphors in use. We used this approach in the MAT study discussed previously.

Third, drawings can serve as wonderfully rich sources of metaphorical data. For example, in a study on workplace bullying, the first author and two colleagues (Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006) asked participants who self-identified as targets of workplace bullying to draw a picture in response to the question “what does workplace bullying feel like?” Participants drew pictures of fist fights, dark clouds, pointing fingers, demons, and more (see Figure 23.2). Coupled with their narratives, these drawings provided insight into the emotive and tacit nature of bullying—that bullying felt like a nightmare in which their boss was akin to a “little Hitler,” and they felt like “abused children” and “slaves.” Identifying and teasing out the implications of these metaphors helped to reveal the deep pain and shame associated with bullying and explain why it was difficult for participants to effectively deal with the situation.

This article about workplace bullying is among a growing number in the field of organizational studies that make use of drawing analysis. In Table 23.1, we provide the context and outcomes of four empirical studies published in the last 10 years that effectively use drawings as a method of data collection, analysis, and representation in relation to organizational research. We then discuss the four ways drawings lend value to organizational research in the areas of empirical value, power-sharing and collaboration, pedagogy, and enhanced representation.

Four Important Values of Drawing and Metaphor Analysis

The Unique Empirical Value

The first overall value of drawings in organizational research is that they provide unique empirical insight. At their most basic, when supplemented with other methods of data collection, drawings increase trustworthiness or credibility of analysis via triangulation (Copeland & Agosto, 2012) or crystallization (Tracy, 2010). For example, in a study of organizational change, Kearney and Siegman (2004) asked participants to come to the interview with a drawing about their experiences and then



Figure 23.2 Drawing From Target of Workplace Bullying Responding to the Question “What Does Workplace Bullying Feel Like?”

Source: Tracy et al. (2006).

interpret it. Methodologically, the authors argued that drawing served as a triangulation tool, especially as drawings require interpretation from participants, and researchers can test their assumptions.

However, drawings are more than just one more layer of data collection. They are also especially valuable for accessing data on topics that are linked to emotion, identity, change, disruptions, or complex issues that are difficult to articulate (Barner, 2008). Describing experience is especially difficult during trauma. Language alone is often inadequate when trying to discuss extreme betrayal and pain (Emery & Lloyd, 1994). Survivors frequently experience significant gaps in memory, and as individuals remember missing fragments, stories morph and change (Herman, 1992).

Some people are not ready to narrate their story. They are approached by social scientists and invited, even required to narrate. . . . Death, divorce and disease stories are hard to narrate. One can only trace the edges of the wounds. There are experiences that are just too shattering to put into words, too fantastic to narrate. (Boje, 2001, p. 7)

Table 23.1 Empirical Studies Featuring Drawing Analysis in Organizational Studies

Reference	Research Context and How Drawing Was Used	Outcomes/Results of Innovation
Bell & Clark (2014)	Students from four UK business schools were asked in groups of 2–5 to visualize and draw “a management researcher,” with the prompt: “If a management researcher were an animal, what kind of animal would they be?” (p. 253). After drawing, students discussed their findings in focus groups.	Through visual metaphors, symbolism and mythology can be made “practically intelligible” (p. 262). “The use of visual methods facilitates expression of ideas, feelings and concerns that may be difficult or threatening to articulate using words alone, in a situation founded on unequal power relations, in terms of both pedagogical and research processes. This enables analysis of the beliefs and values associated with management research practice, and provides insight into how it is lived, not as a rational, technical enterprise but as an embodied, socially enacted and emotional enterprise” (p. 14).
Kearney & Siegman (2004)	Employees at a technology training school experiencing organizational change were asked to draw their experiences of the change. Subsequently, they interpreted and discussed the drawings during individual interviews.	In addition to allowing researchers to quickly assess connections between experiences and emotions, drawing enabled participants to succinctly communicate about their experiences. Methodologically, the authors argue that drawing can be a tool for triangulation, especially as drawings require interpretation from participants, and researchers can test their assumptions.
Schyns, Tymon, Kiefer, & Kerschreiter (2013)	Students in groups of 2–5, were asked to think about leadership characteristics and then “draw a leader.” Drawings were coded for “people versus metaphors,” gender, bodies, symbols, followers, and size of followers in relation to leaders.	Researchers used the analysis of drawings to explore theories of leadership and advocate for adjustments to leadership development practices. In particular, drawings revealed implicit but unarticulated images of leadership. The findings suggest that drawing is a valuable learning intervention for students to acknowledge, question, and potentially transform their implicit theories and beliefs.
Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts (2006)	Focus group interviews with targets of workplace bullying. Participants drew how workplace bullying made them feel, labeled their drawings with keywords, and then interpreted the drawings for the group.	Analysis revealed vivid metaphors participants used to refer to workplace bullying, to bullying victims, and to bullies themselves. “Whether empowering or disempowering, the metaphors pinpointed through this analysis provide targets with words to explain their situation to others—an important move considering that one of the main problems targeted employees face is that their plight is largely invisible” (p. 178).

Drawings are very helpful in emotionally difficult situations. For instance, in the first author's workplace bullying research, drawings provided a summing up and interpretive mechanism (Tracy et al., 2006). Participants who had been faltering and hesitant before the drawing portion of the focus group were suddenly able to narrate their workplace bullying situation in a coherent manner as they reflected on their drawings.

This benefit of drawing lends itself to a range of studies associated with emotion, change, shame, disruption, or abuse (Kearney & Siegman, 2004; Palmberg & Kuru, 2000; Sewell, 2011). As noted by Barner (2008), "the construction of drawings as visual metaphors can help work groups 'give voice' to their emotional reactions to organizational change events, and provide groups with a vehicle for interpreting and framing their experience of organizational change" (p. 120). This allows researchers to quickly assess connections between events and emotions, and enables participants to succinctly communicate their experiences (Nossiter & Biberman, 1990).

Another empirical strength of drawings is accessing and revealing tacit and potentially non-politically-correct assumptions. On the one hand, this is because drawing makes the familiar strange. It forces participants and researchers alike to suspend preconceptions of familiar territory and create anew mundane topics, issues, places, or ideas (Mannay, 2010). For example, when people are asked to "draw a leader," it suddenly becomes evident how leaders are usually imagined as male and solitary (Schyns et al., 2013). Indeed, drawings allow people to express unconscious aspects of their situation or identify what they would otherwise be unable to explicitly discuss, similar to the way metaphor works (Marshak, 1996). Drawings "act as a catalyst for members of teams to 'say the unsaid' both on an emotional/psychological and on a political level" (Vince & Broussine, 1996, p. 9).

For example, Bell and Clark (2014) used visual approaches to access often unspoken assumptions about management researchers by asking UK business students: "If a management researcher were an animal, what kind of animal would they be?" (p. 253). The most consistent genre of drawing to emerge from the analysis was the "great wild beast." The drawings revealed that students view the management researcher as "a powerful, high-status, masculine hero, supported by a cadre of young, junior academics. The consequences of this symbolism are exclusionary and marginalizing of those who cannot or choose not to conform to it" (p. 262). Asking participants to draw puts them in a space of child-like vulnerability, where tacit assumptions may be revealed, providing insight on how management practice "is lived, not as a rational, technical enterprise but as an embodied, socially enacted and emotional enterprise" (p. 14).

Metaphor and drawing analysis also provides access to larger collective narratives. Indeed, "metaphor drives creativity, leading to a communal recognition of the 'way things are' in the world" (Hogler et al., 2008, p. 394). In a study of organizational change by Barner (2008), participants created together a visual metaphor that described their collective reaction to the organization's ongoing changes. Participants discussed and subsequently modified their drawings several times. In doing so, the results of the analysis literally provided a picture of the collective discussion. Drawings in a group setting enable researchers to assess individual-level and collective-level sense-making and compare participant interpretations to their own (Donnelly & Hogan, 2013; Vince & Broussine, 1996).

How Drawing Facilitates Power-Sharing, Collaboration, and Co-Creation of Knowledge

A second primary value of drawings in organizational research is the way they enable researchers to share power with participants, collaborate, and co-create knowledge. This contributes not only to empirical rigor, but also ties to ethical commitments of fairness and equity.

Especially for historically low-power or inarticulate populations, such as children (Mutonyi & Kendrick, 2011); those speaking about trauma, abuse, or stigmatized experiences; front-line or low status employees; and those speaking in a second language, drawings can aid with expressing complex emotions and experiences. For some, whether due to cognitive ability, age, or language, speaking and

writing can be inaccessible, difficult, and threatening (Sewell, 2011). Drawing provides a more accessible and face-saving way to share. In a study with women and children in the Amazon, for instance, Singhal and Rattine-Flaherty (2006) claimed that their participants took “the pencil—a symbol of text, literacy and elitism . . . and turn[ed] it on its head to privilege the creative expression of the unlettered, silenced and the marginalized” (p. 315). On the opposite end of the spectrum, drawing can also destabilize power when researching with very high power individuals such as executives. For those for whom texts and eloquent talking are second nature, introducing a drawing activity reminiscent of childhood may help shake off and disrupt comfortable routines of text centrism and conversational dominance.

By incorporating drawing, researchers open up a space for collaboration with participants as they are asked to help generate material for analysis and consideration (Papa & Singhal, 2007). Drawings can be more complex or ambiguous than verbal answers and encourage dialogical engagement in ways that situate participants as powerful experts and equal players (Tay-Lim & Lim, 2013). Thus, in sharing conversational authority, researchers also enable participants to co-create knowledge in ways that are less common in social science research. As such, drawing provides an important method of conducting participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) where researchers and organizational members work together to address local issues or problems. With drawing, researchers vividly learn what the participants, themselves, believe is important.

Finally, when coupled with interviews, drawing encourages shared analysis. By explaining their drawings, participants provide first-order or basic interpretations that can themselves be important data for researchers. Subsequently, participant-led interpretations can generate further conversation and subsequent analytic insights. In a group setting, shared interpretations can be a critical analytical tool for collective meaning making and also basic analysis as participants identify themes and ask questions of the drawing data (Bell & Clark, 2014; Vince & Broussine, 1996). A nice consequence of tapping into this group-level interpretation is data reduction (Copeland & Agosto, 2012) that still captures contextual information (Schyns et al., 2013).

Pedagogical Value of Drawing

Third, drawing activities and metaphor analysis provide significant pedagogical value for teaching theoretical concepts and data analysis techniques in accessible, creative, and accelerated ways. Utilizing drawings in the classroom enables students to literally see theoretical concepts and, in turn, make sense of otherwise unarticulated assumptions. For instance, in the second author's organizational communication classroom, students are asked to draw an “ideal leader” in whatever way that makes sense to them based upon experience and course readings. Not only do students see through the drawings how they imagine leadership, but they can also quickly compare and contrast their thinking with others (Schyns et al., 2013).

Critically, drawing and discussing enable students to identify and analyze certain assumptions; in the case of leadership, for instance, leaders are commonly drawn as heroic (larger than life), separate from followers, and male. By comparing drawings, students can see and discuss theoretical concepts, identify themes and commonalities, and also challenge stereotypes or problematic assumptions. Additionally, drawing activities are a fun, engaging, short, and nonthreatening way to engage in critical self-reflection (Donnelly & Hogan, 2013). Using drawing activities as a mechanism for course evaluation also enables students to have a more substantial voice in the classroom than provided for in traditional course satisfaction evaluations (Ward & Shortt, 2013).

For qualitative methodology students, drawing and metaphor analysis are important tools for learning how to analyze and interpret data. Qualitative methodology students can learn how to identify themes, group them together, compare and contrast differences in data and interpretations, choose exemplars, and ask important analytic questions (Donnelly & Hogan, 2013). In the first

author's advanced qualitative methods course, she regularly asks students to “draw what graduate school feels like.” This leads to a class discussion whereby students ask questions such as: “If a student sees graduate school as a roller coaster, what might that suggest?” Interpretations might include the following: that graduate school has ups and downs; that it can be exhilarating, disorienting, and scream-inducing; that it is finite; and that it can make people throw up (see Figure 23.3).

Participants not only find drawing activities fun and energy producing (Davis, 2013), but they also learn how interpretations lead to important analytic claims. For instance, students who view graduate school as a terrifying, seemingly out of control experience might also view themselves as less agentic in their program than do students who view graduate school as an exhilarating ride with ups and downs as a matter of course. By practicing with drawings, students can also helpfully understand the difference between interpretation and analysis, learn how to make analytic claims, and note useful areas for collecting more data to support claims (Tracy, 2013).

Drawings as Valuable Representation Practice

Fourth, drawings provide an interesting, vibrant, and easy-to-remember representation practice that is useful in today's increasingly technologically mediated world. People process visuals 60,000 times faster than text, and while they remember only 10% of what they hear and 20% of what they read, they remember 80% of what they see and do (Byrom, 2014). We have found that audiences and students perk up during research presentations that include drawings and other visual elements.

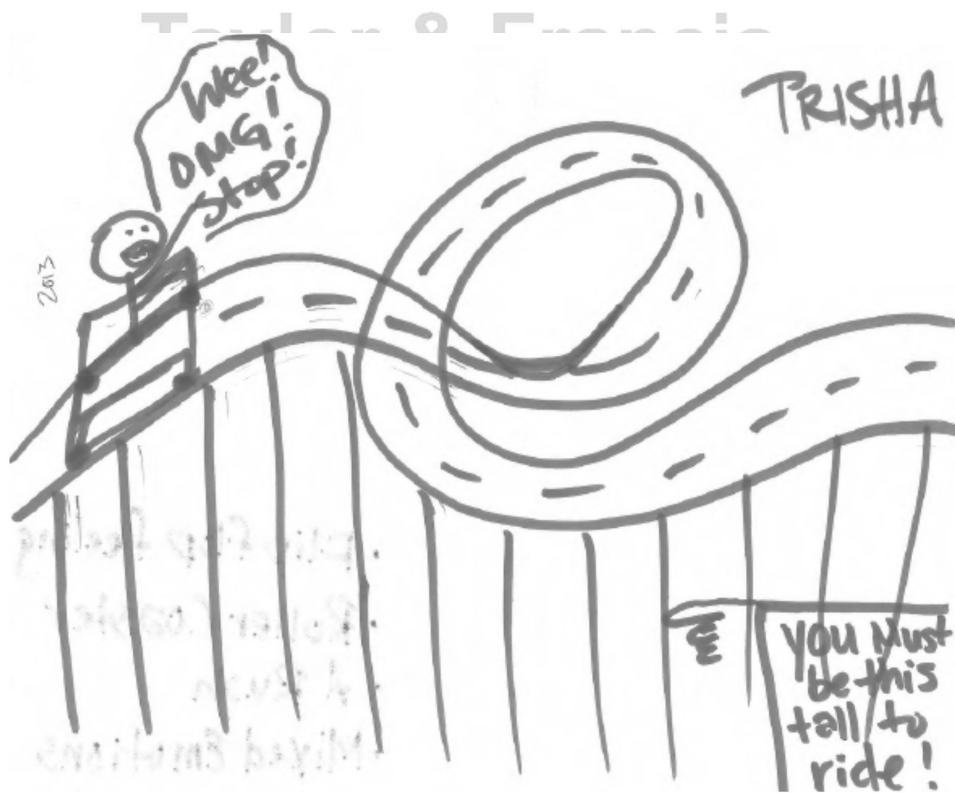


Figure 23.3 Drawing From a Student in Response to the Question “What Does Graduate School Feel Like?”

They ask more questions. They “get” the research findings more quickly and remember them longer. Consider, for instance, the impact of the following hypothetical description of a leader: A good leader is like an energetic bunny, surrounded by knowledge and performing leadership not only for others, but for himself. Now, compare the impact of those words to the impact of the drawing in Figure 23.4. If you are like most audiences, the visual drawing is more quickly communicated, impactful, and memorable than the textual description.

Visual data has been linked to increased information processing, comprehension, and decision making (Meyer, 1991). It enriches and enhances textual representations as people find visuals interesting and memorable. As Pain (2012) notes: “At a cognitive level, because visuals use different parts of the brain than language, the two in combination . . . provide additional cues for understanding and encourage new connections between the two patterns of thought, thus facilitating insights” (p. 7). Indeed, we as authors found it quite enjoyable to “read” and review the literature for this chapter in large part because so many of the pieces included drawings.

Conclusion

As discussed, drawing activities coupled with metaphor analysis have a number of distinct empirical, power-sharing, pedagogical, and representational benefits. As a creative approach to research, these methods generate vivid and compelling data that can lead to insightful, memorable analyses. They are



Figure 23.4 Drawing From a Student in Response to the Prompt “Draw an Ideal Leader”

also a lot of fun, especially in a group setting, as organizational issues come to life in vivid, impactful, and playful ways.

Of course, drawing can also have some potential downsides. We have found that some people say they are uncomfortable sharing drawings because of their supposed lack of artistic talent. Furthermore, because drawings reveal tacit assumptions, sometimes participants can be surprised or disturbed when they draw something that reveals an otherwise unknown bias or way of being. That said, these downsides can be mitigated with some good humor and coaching. For example, we recommend that researchers reassure participants, saying, for instance, “Stick figures are totally cool!” (It also helps if researchers with little artistic talent, like both authors of this chapter, draw along with participants.) Providing extra paper with reassurances that it is okay to start over as many times as necessary is also helpful. Furthermore, during the sharing and debrief, the researcher might offer the following advice: “If you or others find something surprising in your drawing, try not to resist it, but rather be open to what you can learn about yourself through this alternative form of representation.”

We encourage organizational researchers to consider incorporating drawing and metaphor analysis into their research and classroom activities, whether as a standalone data collection method or in conjunction with interviews or focus groups. These approaches are especially well-suited for qualitative researchers, as illustrated in an entire special issue of visual approaches in organizational studies published by *Qualitative Research in Management and Organization* (Davison et al., 2012). The value gained from a few markers and some creative energy has the potential to energize participants, surprise researchers, and delight readers.

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