If a picture paints a thousand words

The use of rich pictures in evaluation

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Why rich pictures?

Overview of the section

This section outlines why rich pictures are useful in framing an evaluation

Rich pictures are useful if you need …

to isolate key Issues

to avoid being overwhelmed in complex situations

to take into account emerging or changing circumstances

to ensure all key stakeholders are represented (and their perspectives heard)

to understand interconnections that might not have been initially apparent

This paper is for evaluation practitioners looking for a tool to help visualise the 'problematic situation' to be evaluated, to aid the development of an evaluation framework.

Why consider rich pictures?

At times evaluators need to work with stakeholders to develop an evaluation framework that responds to the complexity of their situation and still provides robust, credible evaluation findings.

Rich pictures are a Soft Systems Methodology tool that offers a quick and efficient way to work with key stakeholders to better understand their 'problematical situation' (Checkland & Poulter, 2006).

Rich pictures help get you on track fast

In evaluation speak, rich pictures can help evaluators identify boundaries, examine and be cognisant of multiple perspectives, and understand the complexity of relationships between a range of stakeholders.

Oakden, J. (2014). If a picture paints a thousand words-the use of rich pictures in evaluation.

Rich pictures can be easily merged into existing evaluation practice

We have found integrating the use of rich pictures into our evaluation practice helpful as a way of setting the scope for the evaluation, framing the Key Evaluation Questions and in informing the development of the evaluative criteria.
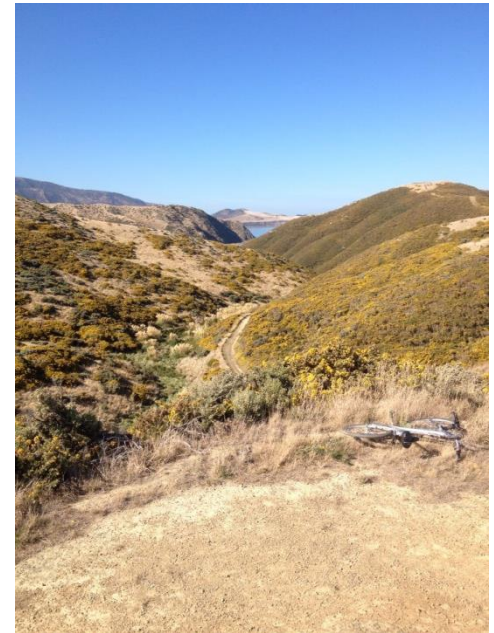
Aren't rich pictures hard to do well?

This section outlines the history to Soft Systems Methodology

Certainly, SSM is a path less travelled

Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) has existed for over forty years and offers considerable value to evaluators (Williams & Iman, 2006), However, it is still relatively unknown in the evaluation field.

Perhaps this is because people expect the techniques of Soft Systems Methodology to be difficult to master or use? This does not have to be the case.

section 02

You don't have to use every SMM tool from the menu

It is not necessary to use the whole Soft Systems Methodology for your project and the literature confirms that many people do just use some aspects of the methodology (Williams & Hummelbrunner, 2010). In this case I am suggesting just using the rich pictures aspect of the methodology.

You can use aspects of SMM. It's a bit like a smorgasbord – you don't have to eat everything on the menu.

section 02

Aren't rich pictures hard to do well?

Why bother?

Developing an evaluation framework is an important part of scoping an evaluation (King, McKegg, Oakden, & Wehipeihana, 2013).

- Rich pictures can be useful in framing situations in evaluations.
- Rich pictures are a time efficient way of generating a lot of understanding about a situation when the right people are involved in developing them.
- The evaluator does not have to have a lot of subject knowledge to facilitate the development of a rich picture.

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- Rich pictures can be used to show complicated situations. They help attempt to capture the real situation using a no-holds-barred, cartoon representation of all the ideas, connections, relationships, influences, cause-and-effect ideas.
- Rich pictures are also a way for us to collectively learn not only about the obvious facts of a situation, but also about abstract or emotional things like the social atmosphere among the different actors or stakeholders.

section 02

Lets give rich pictures a try

This section outlines the process of generating a rich picture

What does a rich picture look like?

Here is an example of a rich picture. *As you can see it is a rough drawing of the way key people involved with a situation see that situation.* It allows them to quickly convey not only the facts of a situation, but their feelings about that situation.

section 03
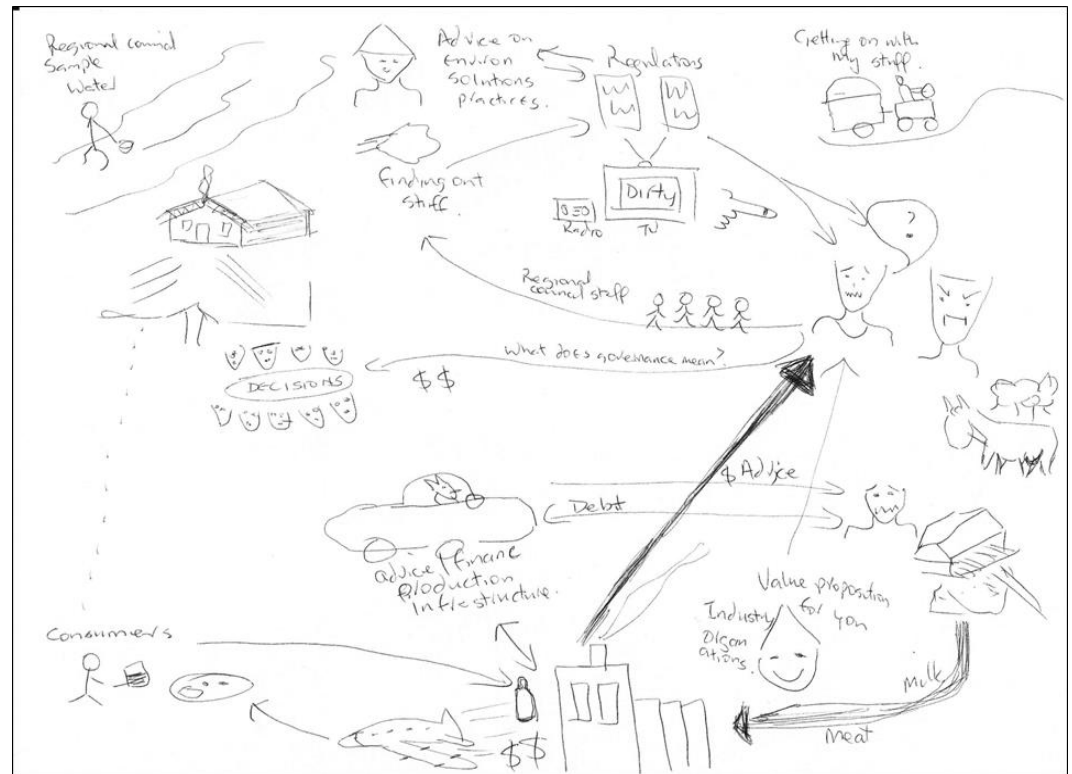
A rich picture of doing rich pictures
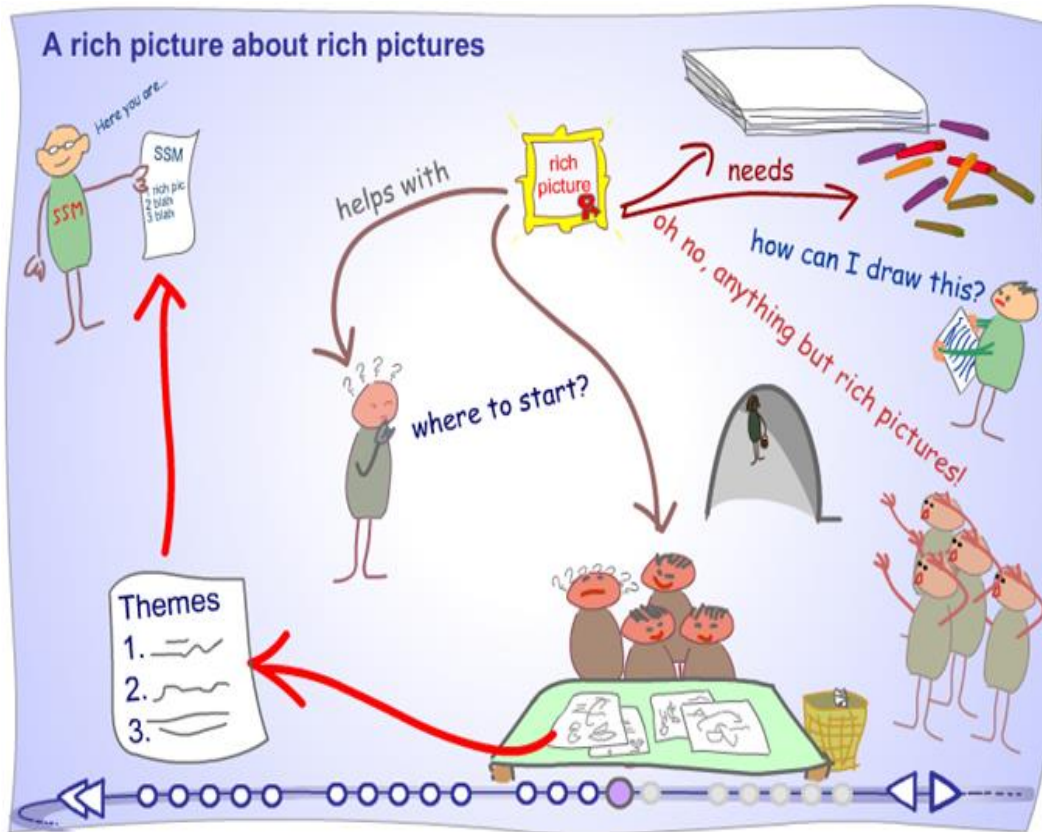
A rich picture about rich pictures

Include structure – this refers things like organisational structure, geographic location, physical layout and all the people who are affected by the situation

Include process – this refers to flows or transformations that occur within the structures such as flows of goods, information, resources etc

Include issues and concerns – what are the motivations and perceptions of each of the key stakeholders in this situation

Include yourself – include your role and relationships with the key actors, structures and processes

section 03

Source http://systems.open.ac.uk/materials/T552/

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Lets give rich pictures a try

Instructions

To do this you need to be in groups of five or six people using the large A3 pieces of paper and felt tip pens.

The question

I'd like you to think about this AEA conference. How did you choose the sessions and events you have attended at this conference, out of all the all the things on offer ?

I want you to draw the challenges and opportunities you experienced in choosing what you'd attend at this conference

Draw all that you perceive as significant or problematic. Include emotions and relationships as well as groupings and connections of various sorts, using symbols and metaphors to represent the situation as you perceive it

Only fall back on words when ideas fail you about how to represent your ideas in another way.

When you are finished we will put your drawings up on the wall and discuss them

.

Recapping the instructions for the activity

The question:

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section 03

Here's one we prepared earlier
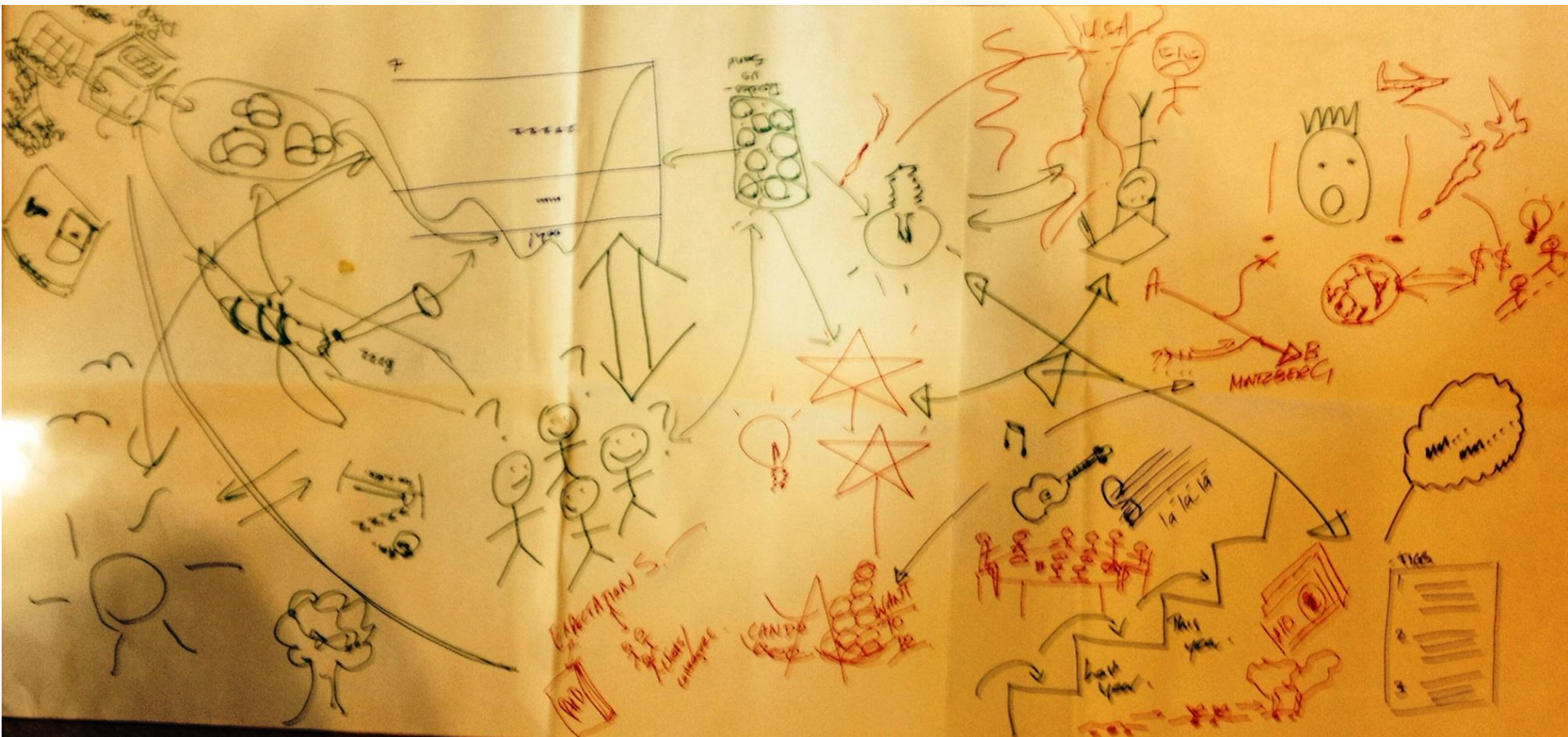
Things to observe about rich pictures

They are messy– four people drew this from four sides of a desk, so some aspects are upside down.

The pictures are rough – the images just convey a point. People used words where they struggled with a concept.

This took about 20 minutes – a lot of different thoughts were collected in relatively short time, and it was a fun activity, with plenty of laughter.

As well as the identifying the challenges of making choices – **emotions and how people feel about things are clearly evident**.

Overseas conference attendee perspective

Personal dimensions	Professional dimensions	Context
To what extent were participants able to effectively prioritize sessions and network: Prioritizing in the face of huge range of choice – follow a TIG, follow what's hot, who are the stars, what interests me.	**To what extent was it possible to locate new ideas and concepts:** Did participants search for new ideas, new books, hot presentations, great presenters? Did they locate ideas that helped them change the way they think about things?	**Whether first-time or longstanding attendee – expectations of the conference** Longstanding attendees might build on previous sessions, new attendees may need to learn the system.
To what extent are there networking opportunities, both formal and informal? Tension between what can do and what want to do in limited time available.	**To what extent did participants identify new business potential?** Instrumental knowledge they might use straight away. These might be things they could take back to their community/organisation, OR, alternatively they may realise they know things they could offer to the world?	**Degree of tiredness** (jet lag) – tension between the need for sleep and the desire to attend as many sessions (and parties) as possible. **Degree of ongoing work** to be done at the conference.
To what extent where there opportunities to connect with old friends, dining, singing, general merry making?	**To what extent were new trends evident?** What emerged as important this year? Was this effectively communicated in the summing up?	**Number of formal meetings set up -** with publishers, international academics (PhD study) & people we collaborate with.
To what extent did the conference programme aid participants to plan their conference How did participants 'plan and organize what they attended?	**To what extent did valuable knowledge transfer take place:** To what extent were participants able to build on prior learning?	**Extent to which interested in leisure opportunities:** We are in Denver. What's on offer? Shopping/shows other attractions.

Source: Placeholder example

Lessons for going forward

Overview of the section

This section outlines the discusses what we have learned about running workshops using rich pictures, that might inform your practice.
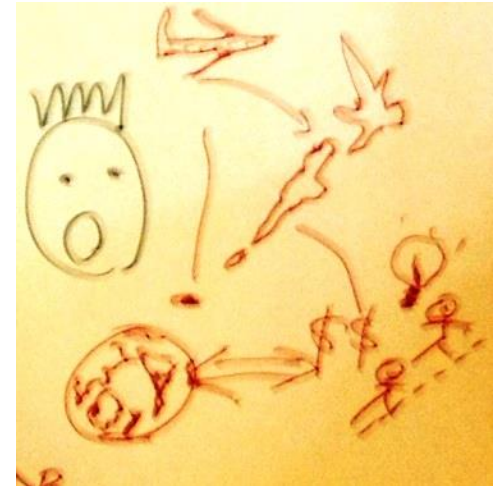
Look for ideas not perfect drawings

Ensure participants are clear what the task is - consider showing participants the Open university picture of a rich picture or even playing the video to introduce the idea of rich pictures before you start the exercise.

Make it clear its fine if the drawing is messy – this is about extracting ideas not being competent drawers – don't get hung up on execution.

Make it clear that we are looking for good ideas not a perfect drawing - positively reinforce all drawing attempts, particularly the stick figures and other quick ways of conveying ideas.
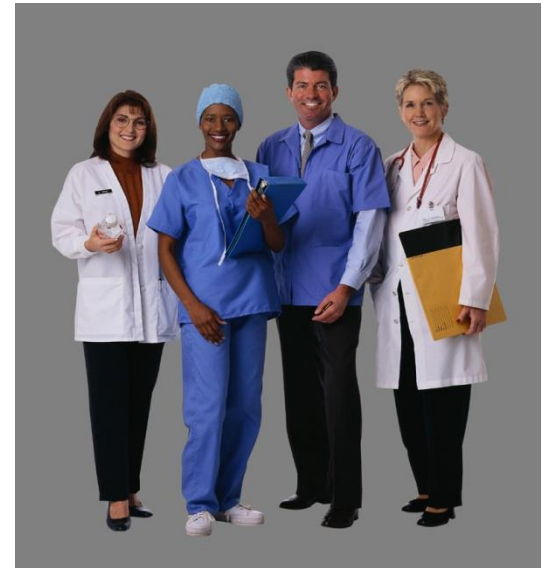
section 04

Address context and dynamics when working in groups

Consider the group dynamics - groups working together need to go through forming, norming storming stages. People are more likely to be able to do an effective rich picture once the group has formed. This means a rich picture is not a good starting exercise.

Consider confidentiality - possibly using Chatham House rules - what is said in the room stays in the room. .

Consider the power dynamics - if you are an evaluator in an organisation, it may be best to get someone from outside the organisation to facilitate a session where rich pictures are drawn

section 014

Set expectations of ambiguity

It is necessary to trust in the process and it may seem confusing or unclear at times.

Thus it is important to set expectations with participants that there will be ambiguity at times.

One way to mitigate this is to provide reassurance and timely feedback to participants during the process.

"Always live at the 'edge of mystery' – the boundary of the unknown"
J Robert Oppenheimer

Ride through the uncertainty

Give reassurance during the process - people may possibly feel uncomfortable and uncertain during the process, reassure them that these feelings are normal during the process, but it will be worth their while.

Anticipate possible participant feelings of being overwhelmed - people may feel overwhelmed when they have finished the picture, again reassure them this is normal.

Photo: Tongariro River Rafting.
http://www.trr.co.nz/rafting/white-water-rafting

section 04

Get participants to explain their picture

Care is needed in the analysis of rich pictures (Bell & Morse, 2013).

The best way to overcome possible misinterpretation of a rich picture is for participants to tell their story once the picture is completed – this generally takes about 5 – 8 minutes per picture. If possible digitally record the story that goes with each rich picture so the explanation is captured for future analysis.

There is real learning for the participants hearing each others descriptions.

A picture can paint a thousand words…

So I invite you to try out using rich pictures next time a situation seems really complex.

Rich pictures can be useful when evaluators need to isolate key issues. They allow evaluators to take into account emerging or changing circumstances. At times they will help aid understanding of the interconnections that might not have been initially apparent. Rich pictures can also help evaluators avoid being overwhelmed in complex situations.

Rich pictures do take a bit of practice, but once mastered can be an important tool in your tool kit.

Leave the door open for the unknown, the door into the dark. That's where the most important things come from. … it be lost is to be fully present … and to be capable of being in uncertainty.
Rebecca Solnit.

section 04

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Rich pictures are not easy to do well (Berg & Pooley, 2013).

However, with a bit of planning they are a useful tool for an evaluator, particularly one with strong existing facilitation skills.

section 05

Acknowledgement

Acknowledgements

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>
> **However, with a bit of planning they are a useful tool for an evaluator, particularly one with strong existing facilitation skills.**

I would like to acknowledge the many people who have shared their knowledge and puzzling in relation to using Soft Systems Methodology in evaluation.

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thank you

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