

generative scribing

A SOCIAL ART
of the 21st CENTURY

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PI Press
Presencing Institute
1770 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02140 USA
press@presencing.com

ISBN: 978-0-9997179-9-8

First Edition, Second Printing

*Book design by Thais Erre Felix in collaboration with Ricardo Gonçalves.
All art and photographs by Kevry Bird, unless otherwise noted.*

For larger, digital versions of the images in the appendix, visit: www.kevrybird.com.

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*I don't demand that all work be a masterpiece.
What I am doing is the right thing for me
—that is what I am and this is living.
It reflects me and I reflect it.*

– Louise Nevelson



know

Focus.

Clarify.

Intuit.

Decide.

Extract essence (and eliminate the superfluous).

Weed whack as necessary to carve a path forward.

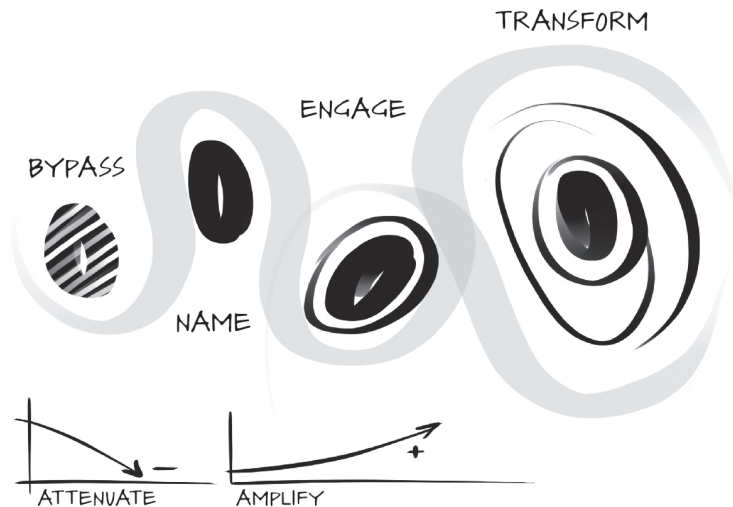
Put a stake in the ground for truth.

Root.

What is meant to be seen on a page will surface, now or at some point, through some hand, somewhere.

If it's not visible now, then it's not ready to be seen.

discernment



Scribes have to choose what to do with the steady stream of content we hear behind our heads. Part of choosing what to draw is subjective, based on our listening skills; part is objective, based on our ability to order and sift data; and part is generative, based on how we connect with source.

One framework, Bypass-Name-Engage-Transform, has proven very useful for managing large amounts of information, helping me decide what and when to draw.³⁶ Note that these four actions do not happen in linear sequence; all four happen at once in a continual and fluid process of “letting go” in order to “let come,” as we experience in presencing. Here is a breakdown of how I apply the four components of this framework.

³⁶ The original framework was conceived by Diana McLain Smith, “Choose the Right Strategy,” in *Divide or Conquer: How Great Teams Turn Conflict into Strength* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin Group, 2008), p. 177. It was then adapted by William Isaacs in the context of dialogic leadership.

In the context of generative scribing, to Bypass is to intentionally not draw.

As a way of tracking the overall flow of a presentation or its content, we resist the urge to write something down until it is clear how the idea fits into the developing picture.

Not everything that is spoken needs to be translated onto the wall. As I describe in the chapter “Choice,” this is where we ease tension for ourselves by accepting that if we understand some of the bits, that is enough.

We choose to focus on the parts that make sense to us—logically and/or intuitively—and surrender the rest. We also deepen our inquiry and attend to the container in order to recognize what is actually needed for the social body to see.

To Name is to choose to include information in the picture.

We might note something of interest in our mind, on a Post-it, or scribbled on the side of a panel. If we draw, it’s literal, using specific words and images that accurately map the speaker’s language and intent.

Sometimes to name is to simply make a list. Seeing key points might be all the group needs to stay on track, and to further interpret meaning at this stage would not be appropriate.

Container sensitivity is key. It’s helpful to know where a group is, where they are trying to go, and how much they want to see or can handle seeing in the moment.

When naming, I keep an ear open to content repetition, reinforcement, and differentiation. I notice, to myself: “What is the same? What stands out?”

To Engage is to bring patterns to light, to deepen inquiry, and to expand the container.

When a point comes up repeatedly, I make sure to include it. I listen from the perspective of the speaker(s), the system, and the social field to recognize unclear verbal streams, with the goal of uncovering the essence of what someone—or a group—is trying to express. (See appendix Figure 19.)

Considering the iceberg model, I seek to identify some structure that's guiding the expression or interaction. I want to figure out what is influencing the mindset of the person speaking. What are the speakers trying to influence with their words?

A group on the verge of breakdown, for example, about to devolve into arguments, might be pushed over the edge by a hastily drawn list that tracks points of opposition. Or maybe this is exactly what they need to break through to different thinking! Explore what is at risk, what is not being said, and what might be seeking expression.

Note that engaging requires a higher degree of skill than purely naming. Graphic recording, which is mirroring content in a literal manner, would be naming. Graphic facilitation, which demands that the practitioner participate in a group's process, would be engaging. To engage is to connect themes within a picture and across the people in a room.

To Transform is to make choices, and moves, that support a shift in individual, group, and system dynamics.

Even from the side of the room we have influence to either disrupt or stabilize through our drawing. Transform with care!

Listen deeply to space between the words for what wants to be seen. Trust that a deeper meaning will arrive, and be ready to include it. And if nothing comes, nothing is yet meant to come.

Notice the sequence and the flow of voices as well as other sounds coming into the room. Once a small flock of starlings darted to and fro, just outside an open window, inches from the end of my wall-long drawing. Their movements and chirps were at first distracting. I named their presence, in my mind, but chose to bypass and keep going.

I had never witnessed such seemingly random flight patterns, though, and that intrigued me. The birds held my attention, so I decided to engage their activity. I drew them in around the words someone spoke—"I want to feed myself"—which, through the process in the room, had come to symbolize self-actualizing. This was the transformative mark.

As generative scribes, we can also influence a room by either increasing or decreasing awareness of certain content, turning up or down the volume.

If an idea has already been expressed several times, we can reinforce it by writing it repeatedly (amplifying). Or we can decide to balance the idea within the overall content of the picture by including just a few keywords (attenuating).

Depending on the needs of a group, we can use a synthetic approach, taking in lots of content and organizing it into clusters, carefully framing and making connections, reducing the complexity and offering cohesion. The resulting image is highly integrated across one plane, one piece of paper.

We could also choose to use a deconstructive approach, intentionally taking one concept and breaking it into parts,

so that what seems like a knot becomes easier to untangle. The resulting image would be the opposite of cohesive, as the approach aims to extract ideas—to expand a conversation and prompt new thinking.

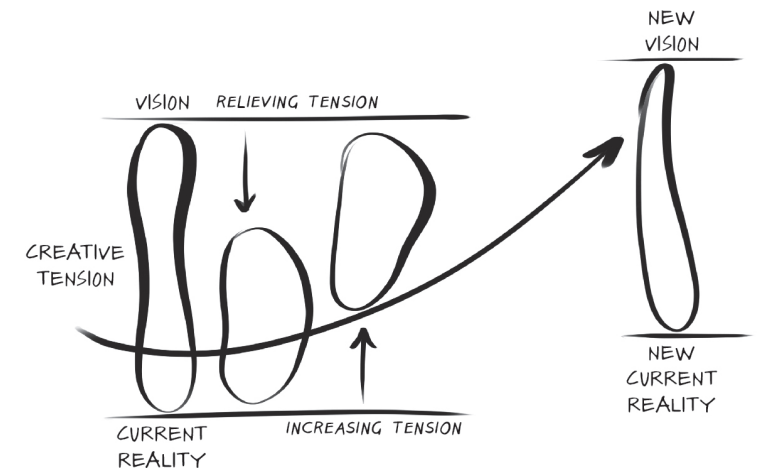
Either approach—balancing or reinforcing—can be woven into any phase of Bypass-Name-Engage-Transform.

As we make sense of what we hear and what is called for in the room, we can actively choose how to respond.

I consider the Know domain to be as informed by the internal and even spiritual senses as it is by any rational thinking.

Content floats, my being moves in and out of it. When something lands in my heart or buzzes louder in my head, and my body cannot *not* act on that signal, then I draw.

choice



In life and in facilitation, the ability to manage creative tension can mean the difference between growing or collapsing.

With vision above and reality at the base, creativity resides between the two. This model from Robert Fritz shows how a practice can remain static or be stretched.³⁷ “Tension seeks resolution” he writes. We are hungry. We eat.

In our practice, we determine the amount of tension we want to sustain.

Sometimes I can determine the structure of my working environment, such as where to set up in a room or choosing who is on my team. At other times elements of the structure are determined for me, like being required to use the colors of a company’s logo or to draw in a particular style.

³⁷ Robert Fritz, *Creating: a Guide to the Creative Process* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1991), p. 27.

In defining my own structure, when do I challenge myself in order to move into my desired future, raising my own bar?
 Or, when do I accept a limit in order to ease some pressure?
 The answer depends on the nature of the creative tension in my mind (dread or excitement), in my heart (lump of sadness or joy), and in my body (stomach in knots or raring to go).

A wide gap between an aspiration and current reality indicates a high level of tension. Noticing this, I ask myself: "How much can I take? Can my and the group's container hold a higher-keyed energy? Where are others in their level of comfort or stress? Can the system expand its boundaries?"

Scribes draw to either relieve or increase tension, and thus facilitate the pace of change in conversation.

Sometimes a group seems edgy, unstable. I will probably want to help hold things together and touch an underlying order to minimize tension. I get more grounded in data to understand how the bits of content fit together to make sense. I imagine the social body as an organism seeking some quiet, rest. I draw more slowly, more carefully. I soften my stance, listen more deeply, and relate to what needs more time to resolve.

Sometimes a group seems ripe for movement. So I draw with more speed, more conviction. My attitude is that possibility is within reach. My marks come out crisp, steady, as if carving a direction for the group to gain momentum and courage.

Over time, if a group intends to change, a generative scribe can help raise the level of vision and note the updated current reality. With attunement to where a group has been and where they aspire to go, we can make the path visible. We can set up conditions for choice.