

## STORY MAPPING

**What it is:** Story mapping is a participatory way to capture a program's milestones, lessons learned, and stories of impact. It works well at the end of a grant cycle or as a reflection point during a multi-year program. Story mapping integrates a visual recorder—also called a visual notetaker or graphic recorder—into a focus group or interview. While participants respond to open-ended questions, the visual recorder illustrates the stories, images, and words shared. Each story mapping session generates a final visual that captures the main themes of the session, which could be accompanied by a qualitative analysis of the focus group transcript.

**Why we use it:** Story mapping produces powerful visuals that communicate impact, context, culture, and community wisdom. Providing a way for participants to see their words and stories shows participants that their ideas are heard and valued. Resulting visuals can be used in many ways: digitized and posted online, integrated into a report, physically hung in an office or community space, or used as a guiding document to ground program activities.

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Especially when including a broad range of participants in a story mapping session, this approach centers community voice in defining impact. Story mapping can complement other quantitative or qualitative measures as part of a broader evaluation strategy, and it can bring life to research findings.

## Types of research and evaluation questions this approach can answer:

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### **Reflecting back and identifying impact:**

What stands out to you in the last year/grant period? What stories demonstrate the impact? What looks or feels different as a result of your program?

### **Learning community or program context:**

What is important to know about your community? What are your community's strengths and assets? What challenges do you face?

**Gathering lessons learned:** Where did you get stuck over the past year? What did you learn? What strategies were successful?

**Vision and future momentum:** What would you expect to see, hear, or feel as your program makes progress towards this vision? Where do you see momentum for the future?

## When this method works well:

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- When it is vital that evaluation products reflect the culture(s) and context of the communities engaged in a program (we'd argue this is always the case).
- When looking for a fun, participatory way to engage program participants, community members, and other audiences in defining impact and reflecting on lessons learned.
- When your project has the internal capacity to do visual recording (maybe someone on staff has the skills to visually record) or a sufficient budget to hire a visual recorder (which may cost between \$500-\$3,000 or more per data collection session).

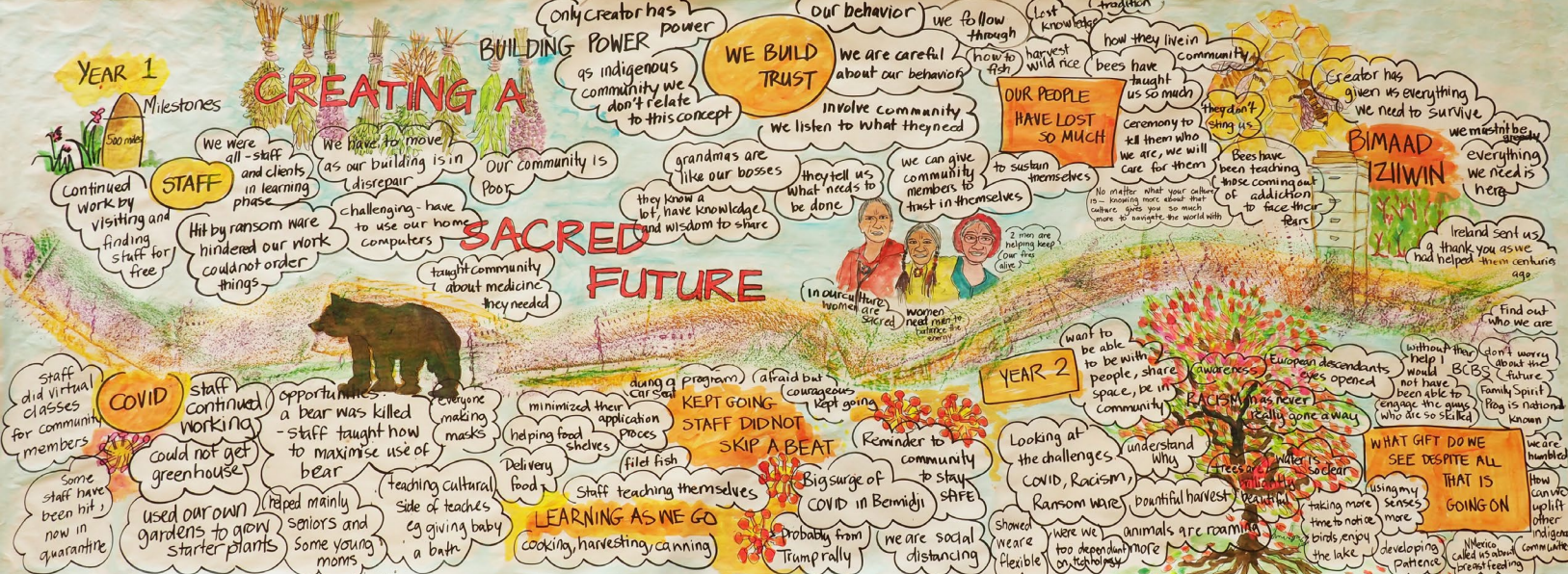
## Project example: Story mapping

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### **Capturing the impact of Manidoo Ningadoodem (Family Spirit) Program**

The Manidoo Ningadoodem (Family Spirit) Program of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe was one of 15 projects funded through the Health POWER initiative from the Center for Prevention of Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota. To capture stories and impact over the 4-year project—and to complement the quantitative measures collected by project staff—the evaluation team hosted annual story mapping sessions with a visual recorder. As Family Spirit staff shared their milestones, challenges, and stories of impact from the year, a visual recorder captured their words and images on a blank canvas. Staff also had the opportunity to share photos, programmatic materials, and other symbols of importance with the visual recorder, who later integrated these images into the final visual. The mapping sessions served as meaningful opportunities to reflect and celebrate the year, and resulted in a visual that reflected Ojibwe culture and traditions.

Note: This project example is an excerpt from the [Indigenous Evaluation 101 Guidebook](#) that was prepared as part of Minnesota's Preschool Development Grant.



Story map of Manidoo Ningadoodem (Family Spirit) Program of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe created by Anne Gomez. This summary describes their work in their first year of Health POWER.

## How to conduct a story mapping session

### Supply list:

- Story mapping protocol, which includes a list of open-ended questions, consent language, and information on how the captured data will be used
- Recording device, if you plan to record the session for analysis or to help fill in the visual after the session
- Visual recording supplies, which can vary depending on what your visual recorder/artist needs to create the visual by hand (white canvas/paper, markers, paint) or digitally

### Step 1: Plan

- Ensure that story mapping meets the evaluation goals, dissemination needs, and budget/resources of the project.
- Design the overall structure of the story mapping session and protocol, including 4-6 open-ended questions for a 1-hour story mapping session, such as: What stands out to you from the past year? What did you learn? What difference did your program make? Where do you see momentum for next year?
- Engage a visual recorder: Determine the role of the visual recorder and invite them into the planning and design of the session. Learn how they prefer to work: how they create visuals (on paper or digitally), what level of involvement they prefer in the planning process, and how much they charge. Ideally, the visual recorder is from the community engaged by the project.
- Determine how the final product will be used and who will “own” the final visual. Then create a consent process for participants that clarifies what they will be expected to do, who will own the visual, who will have access to the visual, and how it will be used.

## **Step 2:** **Make final preparations**

- Purchase supplies: Talk with your visual recorder to see what supplies they need.
- Do a run-through: Nervous about how this will go? Try it out ahead of time with colleagues or friends. This is especially helpful for virtual (online) sessions to ensure that webcams capture the visual as it is being created and to see if additional technical help is needed. If hosting an in-person session, make sure the location works for the visual recorder and allows paper to be posted on walls (or affix paper to an easel or white board).
- Ensure you have needed staff (e.g., facilitator(s), notetakers, technical assistance).
- Prepare participants for the session: Give them a heads up about the visual recorder; send discussion questions in advance; and invite them to bring or email photos, images, and logos that relate to the program.

## **Step 3:** **Do the thing (implementation)**

- Take a deep breath—look at all the planning you have done! Congrats for trying something new!
- Record the session if you plan on conducting a qualitative analysis of the meeting transcript to supplement the visual.
- Be ready to ask gentle follow-up questions during the session to elicit images and stories from participants, such as: Can you share an example of that? Is there a story that comes to mind that demonstrates that point? What did that look like or feel like?
- During the session, allow participants time to review, add to, or correct the visual, and consider asking participants to give a title to the visual.

## **Step 4:** **Refine and finalize**

- After the session, remind participants or program staff to send pictures, photos, videos, etc., to the visual recorder to integrate into the final visual. Make sure to alert the visual recorder to this step, so they can leave space for additional images.
- Conduct the post-session qualitative analysis of the meeting transcription (if applicable).
- Send a draft visual to session participants to double-check the spelling of places or names, that the visual represents their experience of the session, and that nothing is missing.

## **Step 5:** **Celebrate and share**

- Distribute the visual (digitally or physically) to session participants and/or funders based on your prior agreement. Visuals can be displayed in a community space or an organization's office, used as a report banner, shared through social media, etc.
- Host a gathering for program staff to share their story map with other grantees, funders, or community members. Walk them through the main components of the story map.



## Resources we love:

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- ▶ [Better Evaluation](#) for more description, examples, and additional resources, including this [interview](#) with graphic recorder Katherine Haugh
- ▶ [AEA Blog](#) post by Clara Pelfrey and Johnine Byrne (curated by Liz Diluzio) for more ideas on connecting evaluation and visual recording
- ▶ [Ink Factory](#) for workshops on visual notetaking/thinking, examples of illustrations, or information on hiring them for visual recording



Do you have questions about how to get started or want to learn more about story mapping? Reach out to Jackie Aman ([jackie.aman@wilder.org](mailto:jackie.aman@wilder.org)) or Jessica Tokunaga ([jessica.tokunaga@wilder.org](mailto:jessica.tokunaga@wilder.org)).

## Additional ideas for using visual recording in evaluation

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Beyond story mapping sessions, visual recording can be a valuable tool for research and evaluation, including:

**Community forums or meaning-making sessions:** Integrating visual recording into a meeting when disseminating preliminary results, which provides a visual way for attendees to reflect on what resonates, what matches what they already know, and where they see momentum

**Ripple effects mapping (REM):** Inviting a visual recorder to attend an REM session (or create a visual retrospectively with REM themes) to produce images that convey the ripples of impact and ground the results in program- and community-specific images/words

**Logic modeling sessions:** Integrating visuals into logic modeling or theory of change development can heighten impact (and increase the chances that the logic model will be used by program staff)

**Evaluation grounding session:** Visual recording can be used to [co-]create visuals that embody community values as guideposts for the evaluation, and capture important contextual information, community assets, community definitions, or desired outcomes for a project (such as the meaning of “health” or “student success”)