

1ST EUROPEAN VISUALIZATION CONGRESS IN BERLIN

Connecting the Dots

The congress in pictures: At the annual conference for visualizers all sessions were recorded graphically – here the welcome by the hosts Guido Neuland and Holger Scholz.



picture: Mathias Weitbrecht

„Connecting the dots“ was the motto of the first European Conference for Visual Practitioners (EuViz) in Berlin at the end of July 2014. About 250 visualization professionals from around the world attended it. Sandra Dirks and Sabine Soeder took part and summarized the most important trends and issues of the visualizing community.

A huge circle of chairs, hundreds of smiling faces, in the middle a bouquet of flowers and two men who trigger huge applause with two simple sentences: „Hi, I am Guido.“ And „Hallo, I am Holger.“ Even at its opening, EuViz, the annual conference for visualizers, was buoyed by a high mood that would characterize the atmosphere in the tracks and sessions in the following days. For the first time since the founding of the International Forum of Visual Practitioners (IFVP), the global network for visualizers, the annual gathering of the community took place outside

the United States. This was thanks to Guido Neuland of the Neuland company and Holger Scholz, Managing Director of Kommunikationslotsen, who brought the conference to Europe and organized it. They hosted it together with the IFVP – and were rightly enthusiastically greeted and celebrated by the participants for their efforts.

Active learning without a keynote

The process and the content design of the three-day event were designed by Neuland and Scholz, together with a team of experienced visual practitioners (see figure 2, page 14). For the purposes of the conference, the motto „Connecting the dots“ was kept at the forefront of planning to enable participants to connect their own points on various issues in the world of visual practice and to develop them together with others. Everyone was an expert and everyone could contribute and learn something from everyone – that was the basic idea.

Keynotes were therefore consistently avoided. Instead the organizers opted for formats that turned participants into co-designers. The result was an unusual conference concept with a series of large group dialogue formats, such as World Café, Open Space and Fishbowl in plenary, as well as 90-minute parallel tracks which were organized by two or three so-called track hosts and accompanied and document-



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pictures: EuViz

1 Chairs in circles instead of rows: The declared aim of the organizers was to turn the participants into co-designers of the program. In addition to a number of large group formats also the interior design was adapted.

2 The EuViz planning team from left to right: Mathias Weitbrecht, Sabine Soeder, Holger Scholz, Mary-Alice Arthur, Amelie Vesper, Vesper Roswitha, Nicole Hackenberg, Sandra Dirks. Front: Guido Neuland, Verena Hanke. Not pictured: Lynn Carruthers and Ole Qvist-Sørensen

3 Visual communications culture: Recording thoughts and ideas in images should be increasingly promoted in schools, was one of the conclusions drawn at the conference.

ted visually by at least one graphic recorder. The topics of the tracks ranged from mental models for advanced students to the use of visual facilitation in teams and leadership contexts as well as learning and training in visual methods and the particular field of positive visualization.

Promoting professionalization – but how?

What motivates the community was discussed and collected immediately after the start of the event in the form of a World Café. This made clear that for many participants the exchange of practical issues, along with the further development of the professional field which is currently experiencing a large boom.

One of the challenges the industry still faces is how to promote awareness of the service and its professionalization. The ideas that emerged during the conference were developed and recorded in many drawings. The resulting images are documented under the keyword „harvesting“ on the website www.euviz.com and reflect the progress and results of the conference.

As a way to increase the acceptance and dissemination of advisory services, general quality and pro-

fessional standards were discussed. But many participants also strongly supported the requirement that visualizations and the corresponding techniques should be increasingly taught at school and educational institutions. Reminding people that everyone can draw – and that it can help to see things, instead of just listening – was named as the central task for the future of the field (see figure 3).

A key problem that many participants expressed is making the added value of their own contribution clear to clients – and also of being rewarded accordingly. Even now the work of visual practitioners is often only considered to be „nice to have“: pretty pictures that adorn the corporate corridor. The potential that the tool of visual facilitation offers organizations – namely to enhance processes and to improve communication and cooperation – is simply underestimated.

What benefit does the use of visual facilitation have in a business context, was discussed in track two by Christine Chopyak from Denver/USA, Ulric Rudebeck from Stockholm/Sweden and Sabine Soeder from Frankfurt am Main/Germany and the track’s participants. A key conclusion was that visual facilita-

tion offers great potential to improve communication – especially in times of increasing complexity and speed. Language alone can be ambiguous or even misleading, whereas images offer the opportunity to make statements clear and understandable for all and to develop joint courses of action and results effectively.

Using the strength of images

A special action force analysed the role of visualizations in change processes, since a picture can often be worth a thousand words of explanation of the thought-process behind what is being said. Questions like: „What does good collaboration look like?“ and „How should management be organized in the company?“ can be evaluated more quickly and more memorably through images. An important methodological aspect that became clear in the discussion was that Visual Facilitation means not only drawing oneself, but also enabling others to express themselves visually. To this end, the IFVP was requested to develop a metaphor lexicon, in which the images and metaphors of different countries or regions can be recorded

and explained along with the roles and basic definitions used in the field of visualization.

In keeping with its principles, to enable active learning and exchange at eye level, session with well-known personalities in the field were held in the Fishbowl format for large groups. Questions from the audience were presented to pioneers of the field such as the American author and consultant David Sibbet, the first German visual facilitator Reinhard Kuchenmüller, the Swedish strategy consultant Ulric Rudebeck and the president of the IFVP, Lynn Carruthers. Her appeal to the community: stay loyal to your values, create response through your images. And: We are only at the beginning. Everything is in our hands.

**Sandra Dirks,
Sabine Soeder ■**



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Emerging sector

WORKING VISUALLY

The professional field of visual practitioners generally includes everyone who works with images in communication processes. There are no defined quality or training standards. Instead, the particular procedure and methodology is influenced by the knowledge and the training of the practitioner. Those active in the area include trainers, consultants, facilitators, graphic recorders, sketchnoters, educators, artists, designers, cartoonists, illustrators and executives.

COMMUNITY

The International Forum of Visual Practitioners (IFVP) was officially founded in 2001 as an association. The network has about 320 members worldwide. The exchange is very active and mainly takes place online. The community meets once a year. After New York (2013) and Berlin (2014), the 2015 conference will take place in Austin/Texas.

APPLICATION

While there are still no sharply-defined categories, graphic recording and visual facilitation are emerging as common application areas. With graphic recording the results of creativity and group processes and lectures are charted in words and pictures. In contrast to the graphic recorder, the visual facilitator engages more strongly in the process: He combines the role of a moderator/process facilitator and a visualizer in one person. Especially during change processes the work of visual facilitators can be an important basis for further steps.