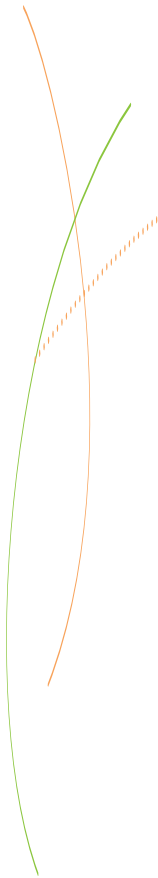


WILDFLOWERS INSTITUTE

THE VISION-BUILDING TOOL IN ACTION



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Since late 2002 I have been observing the application of the Vision-Building (VB) tool in the Wildflowers process of community building in seven communities in the United States and China. I have conducted participant observations at eleven half-day or daylong VB sessions and interviewed more than two dozen participants in these intellectually challenging and often emotionally tense meetings. I have become convinced that VB is not merely a tool but also a rewarding process of experiential learning and discovery, and that one cannot fully appreciate its value and power without seeing it in action. This report, therefore, will focus on the actual functions and effects of Vision-Building in community building rather than formally evaluate its operational mechanisms or methodological implications.

First I will review the different ways that participants have used the VB tool to express themselves. I will then examine the effects and impact of the VB tool in the second section and show that application of the tool has also undergone a continuing process of deepening and developing, which explains why senior Wildflowers fellows have cherished it at all stages of their community work. In the third section, I will briefly explore the links between the VB tool and the Wildflowers theory of community building, arguing that the VB tool cannot be used to its full potential unless one fully grasps the Wildflowers theory.

I. Multifunctional Applications of the Vision-Building Tool

In his paper entitled *Vision Building: Discovering Invisible Cultural Premises*, Dr. Hanmin Liu describes the VB tool as a two-step process of cultural discovery. First, by using blocks, figurines, and other objects to build a three-dimensional model, individuals are able to bypass the usual modes of oral expression and express the inner dynamics of their organization or community. Second, through deep analysis of the models and open-ended discussions, individuals are able to uncover and amplify the implicitly held cultural premises that are important to their community as well as to themselves (see Liu 2002).

It seems to me that Dr. Liu's early theoretical paper may have underestimated the functionality of the VB tool in practice, because the tool can do much more than express the wills of individuals and their community. The VB tool sometimes has surprised its inventor with slightly or significantly different functions that can be classified into the following four categories.

1. Community Mapping

Community mapping is a major function of the VB tool in practice. This function includes the mapping of social-cultural resources within a given community, especially when participants are asked to build a model to show the strengths and assets of their communities, and the mapping of community needs and "will," when participants are asked to build a model to show what is important to them in a given community. In both cases, the VB tool can quickly mobilize participants to share their ideas, demands, and "wills" with one another and to identify the most valuable resources within their own community, such as virtues, social

capitals, and informal leaders. More often than not, the VB tool can also help to map the critical issues in a community. In a VB session held in South Central Los Angeles, more than half the participants—women and men alike—pointed out the lack of a father figure in most models and then engaged in lengthy discussion about the responsibility of fathers in their community.

The user-friendly mapping technique, however, can reveal some deeply held cultural assumptions. For instance, during a VB session held in San Francisco in late 2003, visiting Chinese community leaders and Wildflowers fellows from the Filipino community in San Francisco, the Lao Lu Mien community in Oakland, and the African American community in Los Angeles built models side by side. The most striking difference between the two groups was that the Chinese models were dominated by cars, shopping malls, a school and a hospital, entertainment centers, and government buildings, while the American models emphasized spiritual and relational assets such as church, family, and individual volunteers. Behind the presentations of community assets, as they emerged from the subsequent discussion session, was a different understanding of what a community needs most and what community leaders should do in community building.

2. Historical Narrative

Presenting a narrative about either community history or personal journey, or a combination of both, is the second function of the VB tool, which I have seen in all the eleven VB sessions. The narratives can deliver different messages and, like community mapping, can reveal the model builders' deeply held assumptions. A prominent leader from the Lao Lu Mien community once built a model that vividly depicted the history of his people's dislocations, first within China, then from China to Laos, and finally from Laos to the United States, expressing a strong "collective will" to define and build their new homeland.

In slightly different ways, several African American community leaders narrated a history of losing their own cultural heritage under slavery and racism in American society, a narrative that cries for cultural healing. Model builders often present their life stories through individual models and, through the process, explore and construct their own identities, as I have seen them in the communities of African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, and Chinese. An African American community leader, for example, has built more than a dozen models over the last two years, constantly scrutinizing his role in bridging his community with the outside world. He concludes in one of the recent VB sessions that the market place always teaches people how to leave for the interface culture but never tell them how to return and maintain their core culture. A series of model building inspired him to achieve a good balance between the interface and core cultures, which, according to him, is one of the basic premises for community leadership.

3. Clarification of Mental Frameworks

In an interesting and rather unusual case in 2003, a Chinese professor initially planned to use the VB tool to present his research project on child obesity but ended up presenting a history of community change under modernization. This case illustrates the third function of the VB tool: the clarification of logical links in one's mental framework.

During an interview, the Beijing professor recalled that in the beginning he just wanted to explain that many parents and grandparents feel compelled to convince their singleton child (or grandchild) to eat more because they still believe the old idea that being fat is strong. But once he started to express this research finding in the three-dimensional model, he began to realize that the multiple factors that helped to create this notion of "fatness is strength" were actually historically specific and, even when the contributing factors declined under modernization, the cultural assumption still lagged behind, refusing to change at the subconscious level among local residents. He added that his own framework of interpretation also lagged behind because it became clear to him only after he presented the physical model at the seminar and heard all the comments from its participants. What happened during the model-building process, as he recalled, was that the objects and figurines began to show vividly the complicated interlocking relations among the contributing factors

(such as industrialization, environmental change, demography, education, and government), which in turn helped him to situate all the factors back into the context of the local community. Suddenly, everything began to make sense because he saw clearly from the model the social-cultural premises underneath the social phenomenon of child obesity.

In a sense, the process of seeing the links among multiple parts of the whole is one of logical clarification, or the clarification of one's mental framework. The power of the VB tool lies in the simple fact that it can help to make the invisible (the logical links) literally visible through the arrangements of objects and figurines. This clarification function becomes more important when individuals try to express some rather abstract ideas through their models. For example, several community leaders from the Red Wolf Clan of Albuquerque, New Mexico, underwent lengthy discussions on how to show the centrality of spirituality in their community, using the blocks and figurines to help clarify their minds, and finally decided to depict a person being lifted up by a small circle of people in a sacred ceremony. This presentation in turn inspired the leaders to better appreciate the power of spirituality in their community work because all of them had been through similar rituals of revelation and identity searching.

4. Situational Analysis

Vision-Building has also been used as an analytical tool to examine a given issue or community event and includes both the presentation of the issue or event depicted in the physical model and an analysis and group discussion. For instance, the leaders of the Filipino community in South of Market (SoMa), San Francisco, used this method to tell what happened at a cultural festival in their community when a large amount of trash was left at the venue. They tried to find an appropriate interpretation for the lack of civility among their many fellow Filipinos. In this case, the event-depicting model has led them to scrutinize and critique their own culture.

One of the most impressive models of situational analysis, however, was built by a nineteen-year-old African American man; with the model he presented a social drama showing how his community is under various attacks from the outside world. He built a model of his community and then knocked many figurines down with his hand, explaining as he did so which force has let which part of his community down. Most intriguing was that this young man had never made a public speech. His newly gained skill of articulation surprised almost everyone in the audience. This clearly relates to the power of the VB tool because the tool made it possible to present a drama for the purpose of analysis.

Thus far I have witnessed four major ways of applying the VB tool: community mapping, historical narrative, mental framework clarification, and situational analysis. All of these are used to express the individual model builder's vision and will; yet what they eventually express always goes beyond the individual, revealing something that is deeply held and shared in a given community. It is the latter that becomes the dominant theme during the second phase of the application of the VB tool, when participants sit in a talking circle to reflect on and uncover the cultural premises inherent in their models.

II. The Effects and Impact of the VB Tool

The unique "symbolic language" of the VB tool—three-dimensional and visual—is the major reason why it has been applied in different ways and has performed different functions, because participants in VB sessions can bypass the limitations of any spoken or written language to set their minds free. For example, the Chinese are quite sensitive about status and social hierarchy and, throughout the socialization process, they have shown this sensitivity in the way they speak and the words they use. The authoritarian communist state added more constraints to the public expression of opinions, and the countless ideological taboos have made public communication extremely difficult. When Wildflowers Institute introduced the VB tool to Chinese communi-

ties, both local leaders and community residents embraced it as a powerful way to open up the communication channel across the hierarchical structure of social relations.

The use of English or any other language in American society is not completely innocent or neutral either; English also embodies various political, cultural, and religious constraints or influences, which in turn affect the openness and effectiveness of communication among individuals and/or organizations. This is particularly true when communication goes across the boundaries of gender, race, and social class. The three-dimensional and visual “language” of the VB tool helps participants to liberate themselves from these political and ideological constraints, as was shown in several VB sessions in China, where community leaders from different regions and ethnic cultures engaged in open debate and in-depth discussions on a number of issues that are otherwise too sensitive to even bring up.

Moreover, the three-dimensional and visual “language” of the VB tool does not exist in abstract; instead, the meaning and power of the objects, blocks, and figurines in VB can be manifested only through model-building sessions. The actual practice of the VB tool thus builds the critical pathway or point of entry to a relational space, a social space that is constructed by the collective participation of the individual model builders. Veteran participants have named this the Wildflowers space, and several fellows have commented on different occasions that it would be difficult to create the Wildflowers space without employing the VB tool. It is in this space that participants continue to use the VB tool to uncover the hidden cultural premises and strengths within a given community, which has resulted in cultural healing, leadership training, and cultural discovery.

1. Cultural Healing

By giving an oral presentation of the physical model, answering the questions asked by the VB facilitator, and engaging in intensive discussions with fellow participants in the same VB session, an individual model builder typically experiences a revelatory process of identity searching, which often evolves into a process of cultural healing for not only the individual but also the community (through the individual’s leadership).

This healing process often starts when the individual feels compelled to confront the fear, anger, and/or marginality that have been hidden inside her or him and share this inner confrontation with fellow participants in the VB session. In this connection, the attentive and sympathetic audience becomes part of the VB tool as well because the individual who is undergoing the healing is vulnerable and thus needs the group’s respect, encouragement, and understanding.

The audience also benefits from hearing the individual’s battle in identity searching and construction. The story encourages others to share their struggles collectively, and these experiences trigger personal memories and reflections. The sharing of these memories and reflections helps everyone see his or her own journey from different perspectives. This in turn helps to increase the mutual understanding among different ethnic groups and thus uplifts the healing to a higher level.

2. Leadership Training

The second effect of the VB tool is the rapid and steady development of leadership among community leaders in almost all the seven communities that Wildflowers Institute has been working with. For instance, a leader of the Latino Indians in New Mexico acknowledged that he was first awakened when he observed a model that several Filipino community leaders had built in one of the earliest VB sessions, in which the notion of “placita” emerged as the indigenous concept of the center of social gravity for the Filipino people. He then began to search for its counterpart among the native Mexican cultures and finally found it in the religious sites of the ancient Aztec people. By employing the VB tool many times to search for a culturally relevant model for his people, he eventually arrived at a more systematic framework of the multiple worlds that consists of the individual, the family, the community, the institutions at the larger social setting, and the spiritual world that resides inside each individual.

Although bearing the heavy influence of bureaucratic system, the dean of the School of Public Health at Capital University of Medical Science in Beijing told me during an interview that from the management point of view, the VB tool, which had been applied in his school a number of times, had three advantages: it could break the hierarchical culture in China and enable subordinates to speak up; it is highly accessible to ordinary people who normally cannot master the written language well; and it could promote public participation because people found the VB tool playful and inspiring. Because of these advantages, this university dean admitted that he and his colleagues realized the necessity to switch from the previous top-down approach to a bottom-up approach. Similar comments were made by government officials in the two Chinese communities where the VB tool was used and tested before.

Admittedly, the VB tool cannot change anything in the real world; but by cultivating the mental power and changing the perceptions of the community leaders, the VB tool can and does play an active role in real terms. The best example in this connection is the gradual development of youth leadership training in the Wildflowers process. The issue first emerged during a VB session in the spring of 2003 and then was amplified when two Iu Mien youths built their community model during a Wildflowers site visit in June 2003. Among others, the most impressive element in the youth model is a thread that connects the old Iu Mien community in Laos, the new Iu Mien community in Oakland, and American society at large. The two young model builders claim confidently that the thread represents the Iu Mien youth. Since then, youth leadership training has remained on the priority list among the Iu Mien community leaders, and their concerns and plans continued to show up in the models that these leaders built in subsequent VB sessions.

3. Cultural Discovery and Reformation

Finally, the VB tool has proved to be appropriate and powerful in uncovering the shared cultural assumptions and premises of social relations, which are so deeply embedded in people's minds and behavior that they usually cannot be easily captured by oral or written language. In other words, these assumptions and premises normally reside at the level of collective subconscious. In the above-mentioned cases, the premise of the placita was buried in the social memories of the Filipino immigrants, and the folk belief of "fatness equaling strength" managed to escape the trained eyes of public health experts and scholars in China. But the premise and the folk belief emerged organically during VB sessions and were then uncovered by community leaders as the key to reconstruct the collective identity or to solve a particular social problem.

Wildflowers fellows call the specific mechanisms of this uncovering process "naming it, claiming it, and owning it." For instance, the Filipino community in SoMa of San Francisco was able to name and claim a public space as its placita and, through a series of cultural events, unite its people around the newly found center of social gravity. In this sense, the VB tool also provides the point of entry to cultural reformation.

It is important to keep in mind that the VB tool is designed to let participants uncover the cultural premises with their own strengths, and through the discovery process, participants gain not only knowledge about what to do but also the mental ability to do it. Moreover, participants discover it (which can be social capital, cultural premises, or center of gravity in their community), name it, and claim it. Consequently, they also own it. So, in the end, what the VB tool does is to empower the community leaders and the people involved.

This empowerment and ownership process can also happen at a more abstract level of cultural reformation, such as the reassessment of one's own cultural heritage. To illustrate this point and situate the VB tool back into the context of action, let me cite three models built by a leader and thinker of the Filipino community in San Francisco.

In May 2003, the Filipino thinker built a model that consisted of three communities, one in the homeland of the Philippines, one in the South of Market district in San Francisco, and the other in Daly City in suburban San Francisco. He was struggling with the following dilemma: given that people have left their core culture in the homeland when they immigrated to the United States and that the younger generation of more successful

Filipinos is moving to the suburbs in increasing numbers, how can his community maintain its identity and strengthen its culture in the context of the powerful market and capitalist culture.

In late June 2003, he built another model that features the flow of people, capital, and, most important, cultural values back and forth between the Philippines homeland and the Filipino communities in San Francisco. These flows vividly captured the fundamental feature of the globalization age, but they also indicate that the Filipino core culture can travel and indeed has traveled to other places across the Pacific. Conversely, the culture in the homeland is also undergoing rapid change as global capitalism is taking a dominant position there. Needless to say, this important discovery helped the leader and his colleagues to strengthen the identity of their community.

The same leader built the third model in August 2004. As mentioned earlier, he and his colleagues used the model to depict the lack of civility among fellow Filipinos after many of them left a large amount of trash at a cultural festival in their community. In this model, he chose to use bamboo to represent the core culture because bamboo can be bent easily but can always be returned to the upright position, symbolizing the flexibility and endurance of traditional Filipino culture. The figurines that symbolized participants at the cultural festival were formed into family groups. The notion of caring, according to the Filipino thinker, applies mostly to family members and rarely to public space. The portrait of this model encouraged other Filipino community leaders to explore further why few people care about the trash left in the public areas, and a tone of self-critique gradually dominated their interpretation of the third model.

III. The Tool, the Theory, and the Wildflowers Process

In conclusion, the application of Vision-Building has proved to be very effective and reliable in gathering people's opinions, needs, and ideas about their community and mapping the internal strengths and assets of the community. In this sense, Vision-Building is indeed an excellent tool that is (1) highly operative because it is always enjoyed by the participants, (2) quite efficient because it can achieve the best results and solve the targeted problems in a short time, and (3) exceptionally powerful because it eventually empowers the people who use the tool.

However, it is inaccurate to view Vision-Building as merely a tool. It not only can perform more functions than mapping people's ideas and communities' internal strengths (as shown in the previous sections), but it also can fundamentally change the way people perceive themselves and their communities, which in turn can eventually change the way people build their communities. Through numerous VB sessions and other Wildflowers activities, participants in the Wildflowers process have made impressive achievements in cultural healing, leadership training, and cultural discovery because, during this process, they also reconfirmed their identities and reinvented themselves as better and stronger people.

Vision-Building provides the critical link between the Wildflowers theory and the actual practice of community building, and the three are inseparable in reality. This observation actually comes from one of the veteran practitioners of the VB tool, a senior Wildflowers fellow and a community leader. He told me that in his experience, the VB tool seemed to take a life of its own during the years that Wildflowers fellows have engaged in identity searching and truth seeking through Vision-Building and other Wildflowers activities. "To me, the tool and the theory cannot be separated from the practice," he said. "I am right in the middle of them and I am practicing both of them."

There are two insightful and important points in this brief statement. First, the VB tool is guided by the Wildflowers theory of community change and development. One cannot apply the VB tool well without learning the basic notions in Wildflowers theory, such as the both/and approach, the core and interface cultures, the center of gravity, and the hidden cultural premises that determine social relations and behavior.

Second, the VB tool does not lock a person's mental capacity at any point; instead, continuing practice of the VB tool only encourages the individual to explore further and wider through more and more sophisticated models, sometimes challenging and even negating previous discoveries and replacing them with new ones. This is why several experienced community leaders and senior Wildflowers fellows, who have practiced Vision-Building many times, demanded to practice it again during a recent Wildflowers site visit, saying that they somehow felt incomplete without sharing their latest thoughts with one another through Vision-Building.

In the final analysis, in order to fully exercise the power of Vision-Building, one needs to fully understand the Wildflowers theory and to be willing to change one's own assumptions in light of the cultural discoveries that the VB tool brings out.