

River Journey Mapping: Facilitator's Guide

The River Journey Mapping is a visual activity that invites participants to reflect on their professional or learning journeys using the metaphor of a river. Inspired by arts-based research and participatory facilitation approaches, the activity encourages participants to represent their experiences visually, rather than only through words.

This activity works well in classrooms, workshops, research conversations, or debrief meetings of any kind because it creates space for a different way of expressing experience. By combining visual expression with dialogue, the Journey Map invites participants to pause, reflect, and recognize the relationships and values that shape their work.

Process

1. Sketch / assemble (10-15 minutes)

Invite participants to sketch or assemble a river to represent their journey as educators, learners, etc. Along the river, they can identify and mark different moments such as beginnings, influences, challenges, turning points, or hopes for the future. You can share the river image list to inspire meaning-making. The ideal group size for deep dialogue is anywhere between 6-20 people

River Elements	Potential Meaning
	<i>Note that participants will give meaning to their own elements—there is no right way of representing an experience.</i>
Source/mouth of the river	Beginnings, early influences, love
Calm water	Progress
Rapids	Challenges, movement, change
Confluences	Collaborations, weaving
Bends	Changes or turning points
Islands	Moments of isolation, reflection, pause
Rocks	Challenges, hurdles

Bridge	Transition, connection
Delta	Future directions, hopes, possibilities
Other...	

Each map becomes a personal narrative of how participants arrived at their current work and where their journey may be flowing next.

2. Share

(Suggested time 10-20 minutes for groups of 3-4 participants. This is dependant on group size: allow enough time for each participant to share.)

After creating their maps individually, participants can share their journey in small groups. Sharing often reveals common themes or potentially shared experiences. In this way, the journey map becomes not only a reflective tool, but also a way to surface collective patterns and insights within a group. Participants may choose to share as much or as little of their reflection as they wish. The intention of the activity is to create space for reflection, dialogue, and relational learning.

Invite participants to start with a description, the *what?* At this point the goal is to simply notice, without interpretation. Next, invite participants to trace connections and move into symbolism and meaning making.

3. Debrief and dialogue

(Suggested time 30-40 minutes)

Once each participant shares their journey map, you can invite the large group to reflect on a variety of questions. Here are some suggestions:

- What did you notice as you mapped/shared your journey?
- Which relationships shaped your path most strongly?
- What patterns emerged across the different maps?
- Where does your river feel like it is flowing next?

Expanding the debrief to include relational systems

The river metaphor can open a conversation to explore meaning that emerges from multiple overlapping dimensions and a relational systemic perspective. The section below provides ideas to expand our capacity to identify multiple layers of reality (relational, ecological, temporal, systemic, etc.) that shape our experiences.

For example, a river can be seen as a living being, a cultural symbol, or a historical pathway. When we expand our awareness, we avoid flattening reality into reductionist thinking and invite sensing the complexity of living systems.

3.1 Mapping relationships

A meta-relational paradigm allows us to move beyond a simplistic perspective and focus on the patterns, entanglements, and dynamics that shape our experiences. Invite participants to draw lines between elements and ask:

- How does one element influence another?
- Are there any cause-effect relationships or loops?
- How do humans and non-humans affect each other?
- What flows between elements? What else is there to think about? Consider historical, cultural, or systemic influences. Make relationships to eco-cycles
- What happens if we move beyond the fixed metaphor and into relational patterns that change depending on context?

3.2 Exploring dimensions

Invite participants to explore the journey from different dimensions. For example,

- Temporal: how has the journey changed over time/generations/contexts?
- Symbolic/mental models: what meanings, stories, or teachings are attached to the river elements?
- Ecological: how do other elements (cycles, seasons, eco-systems) influence the journey?

Materials

For in-person facilitation: markers, paper, printed river tiles or puzzle.

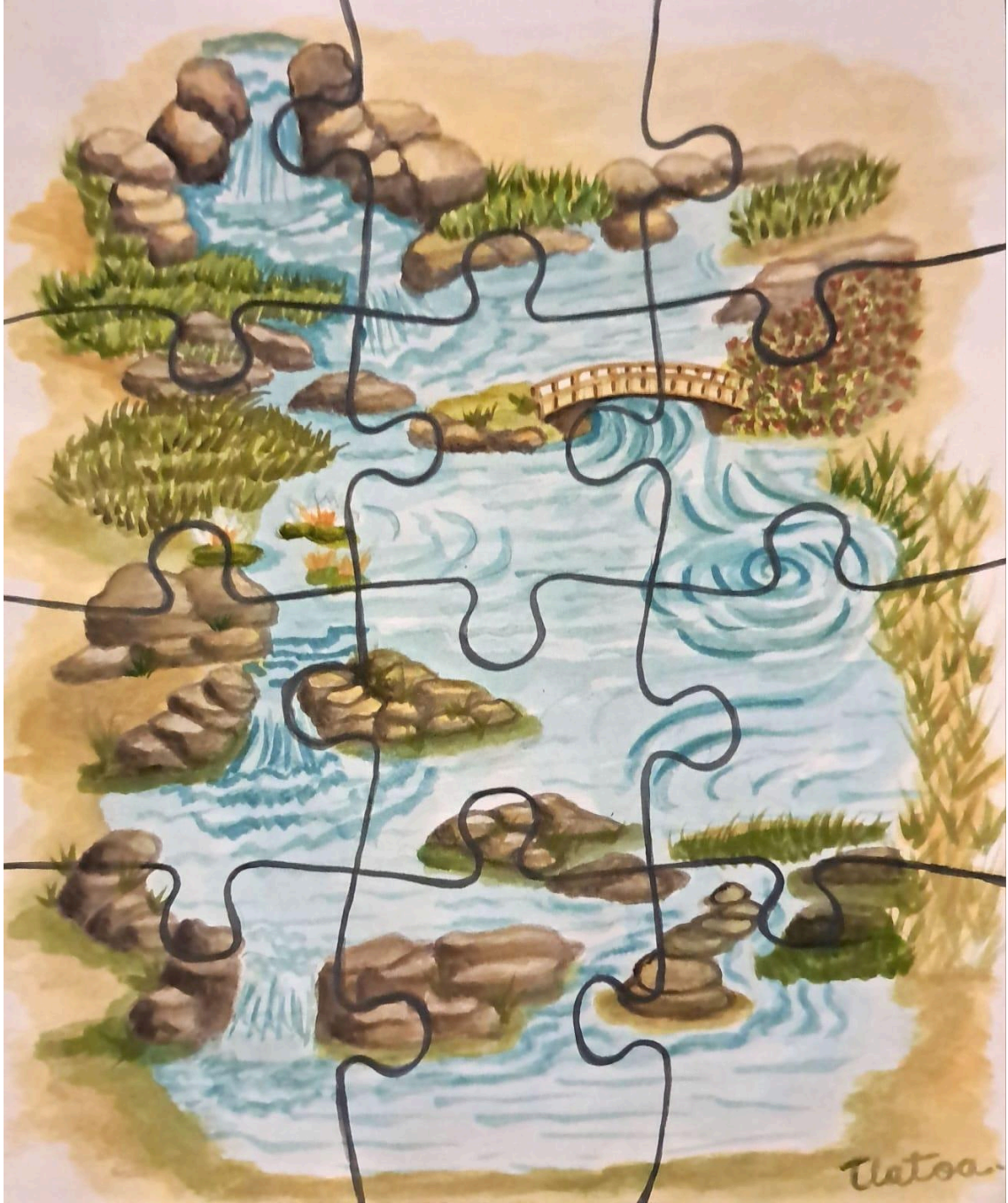
Online facilitation: facilitators can share the river tiles on boards like Mural, Miro, or Padlet.

Accessibility and Multiple Ways of Participating

Facilitators can encourage different ways of reflecting, expressing, and participating. This activity invites participants to reflect on their journeys using visual metaphors, but drawing or visual mapping can be adapted. Participants can engage in ways that feel comfortable and meaningful to them. Some participants may prefer to write, speak, or describe their journey verbally instead of creating a visual representation. Other participants might choose to witness, which is an important role to observe, validate, or make connections.

Riffs and Variations

This adapted River Journey Mapping activity invites participants to reflect on their journeys through an interconnected lens. Using the image below, ask participants to explore how their experiences can be looked at in isolation or as part of a whole.



Art by Arlette Tellez Tlatoa