

Generative tools

Kits of materials (images, words, pieces) that people use to create collages, maps or models to express experiences, feelings and ideas that are hard to put into words.

In Spanish

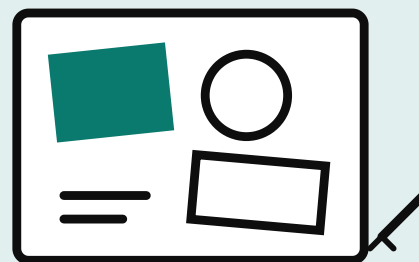
Herramientas generativas

Origin

Sanders (2002); Sanders and Stappers (2008)

Output

Collages, maps or models made by the participants themselves



What it's for

It brings out needs and desires that don't come up in an interview, because what people say and do doesn't tell the whole story.

Key elements

Make, not just talk

Creating something by hand helps people think and remember.

Open materials

Ambiguous images and words that invite interpretation.

Tell what was made

The person's explanation is the most valuable part.

Tool, toolkit, technique and method

Tools are the materials; the toolkit, a set designed for a purpose; the technique, how they are used; the method, how they are combined in a project.

How it's done



Prepare the kit. Images, words and a clear prompt.



Create. Each person builds their collage, map or model.



Tell it. The person explains what they made and why; it is recorded.

Applications in design

✓ When to use it

Early in the project, to explore experiences, emotions and desires.

✗ Avoid

Analyzing the collage without the explanation of the person who made it.

👁 Don't fall for it

Test the kit first: too many pieces overwhelm and too few limit.

Connections

Builds on

■ Say vs. do

Related to

■ Design anthropology

■ Co-design

■ Participatory design

■ Social design

■ In-depth interview

■ LEGO® Serious Play®

■ Cultural probes

Authors and works

2002	Elizabeth B.-N. Sanders	Argued for moving from user-centered design to participatory design, in which people create.
2008	Elizabeth B.-N. Sanders and Pieter Jan Stappers	Proposed that designers make tools so that non-designers can express themselves creatively.
2010	Elizabeth B.-N. Sanders, Eva Brandt and Thomas Binder	Organized participatory tools and techniques by their form (making, telling or enacting), their purpose and their context.

Sources

Original sources

- Sanders, E. B.-N. (2002). From user-centered to participatory design approaches. In J. Frascara (Ed.), *Design and the social sciences: Making connections* (pp. 1–8). Taylor & Francis.
- Sanders, E. B.-N., & Stappers, P. J. (2008). Co-creation and the new landscapes of design. *CoDesign*, 4(1), 5–18. [View source \(https://doi.org/10.1080/15710880701875068\)](https://doi.org/10.1080/15710880701875068)
- Sanders, E. B.-N., Brandt, E., & Binder, T. (2010). A framework for organizing the tools and techniques of participatory design. In *Proceedings of the 11th Biennial Participatory Design Conference* (pp. 195–198). Association for Computing Machinery. [View source \(https://doi.org/10.1145/1900441.1900476\)](https://doi.org/10.1145/1900441.1900476)

Last reviewed: October 25, 2026

