

Place, People and Voice: Creating and Communicating Expressive Content via Cartoons

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Abstract

Following one to one interviews with 90 participants in adult literacy training courses we sought ways to provide quality research feedback both to them and to governmental adult literacy policy makers and funders in ways other than in written reports. Pictorial images were designed comprising a combination of **place** (photographs of the research site Wanganui), **people** (depictions of our interviewees following actual participant demographics) and **voice** (interviewees' words selected from interview transcripts. To date little detailed attention seems to have been paid to the mechanisms of just how expressive content in media of this nature is manufactured or communicated. We explore how expressive content is produced by a cluster of factors including the appealing expression on or form of the person's face, the words used, and an evocation of community values to be inferred from the person's words. We go on to explore how the images that we depict are an attempt to construct voice and person as strong individuals who are striving to better themselves. As such we undertake a particular construction of people of low literacy in community and accept that our communicative intent is political in nature.

Wanganui is a community of about 45,000 people, some of whose civic leaders approached us with the request to undertake research into adult literacy there. The initiator and primary community partner in this research was the Wanganui District Library, followed by further research collaborators such as Literacy Aotearoa (Wanganui), the Whanganui Community Foundation, a funding body with some research capability, and Te Puna Mātauranga o Whanganui, an Iwi (tribal) based educational development authority.

Details of what became a substantial, \$2 million, longitudinal community-based research programme funded by the NZ Foundation for Research, Science and Technology (FRST) can be found at Literacy & Employment Methodologies (n.d.). One of the most important methods we employed was a series of one to one interviews with 90 participants in adult literacy training courses. A challenge for us was how best to provide quality research feedback to these people, who possessed varying but generally low functional literacy in English. Usually feedback on research results to participants is provided in writing, on the assumption that reading skills are of a sufficient level. However this did not necessarily apply in our situation. If feedback to our research participants comprising the written word was not suitable, then pictorial approaches might have some promise, though we had some anxieties about the problematic nature of pictures. For example, we might be regarded as patronising in producing what was essentially a visual text, almost a comic book, depicting our interviewees speaking their words.

While originally we had had feedback to our interviewees in mind, we started as well to consider the possibilities inherent in employing visual images in our research reports, also employing along with images the actual words used by our interviewees. The audiences for these reports were to be mainly policy bureaucrats in central and local government agencies, along with local and regional adult literacy funding agencies. For such audiences, how best to privilege and bring to the forefront of their awareness, the words spoken by people in the Wanganui community with low functional literacy in English?

We looked for ways to represent to our audiences as effectively as possible the words as spoken by our interviewees and briefed our illustrator, Kerry Ann Lee, to produce a series of drawn characters based on the actual demographics (age, gender, ethnicity, etc.) of our interviewees. These were to be depicted as ‘average citizens’, such as with ‘ordinary’ clothing, facial expressions, etc., signalling the status of people who were not to stand out as being different, socially excluded, etc. Kerry Ann then grounded her characters within Wanganui sites, superimposing them upon photographed contexts familiar to residents of Wanganui and elsewhere. The net result was a combination of **place** (photographs of Wanganui), **people** (depictions of our interviewees) and **voice** (interviewees’ words selected from interview transcripts). For examples, see Literacy & Employment Research Posters (n.d.).

We sought to mediate how viewers of these images might perceive people of low functional literacy. These images were intended to normalise these illustrated individuals, with the intention of providing an implied status as everyday persons, the mainstream, not as marginalised people, or ‘the other’. Therefore it was important for the look and feel of the illustrations to signal respect towards those depicted.

The interviewees’ comments to be illustrated, though the words of our research participants obtained from interview transcripts, were produced in response to questions formulated by researchers, were chosen by the researchers, and were framed in particular

ways and within given contexts by the illustrator, on the basis of her own artistic and design judgement. Yet within these constraints we sought ways to make the whole depiction of place, people and voice, as representative as possible of the people in context.

We were interested in Bal's (1996, p. 264) questioning of the processes by which an image is seen and her warning against what she calls "an unexamined positivist conception of sight".

We thought our conception of sight was quite positivist (though not unexamined) in its political intent. Yet it was arguably also literally constructivist not so much for its literal assemblage of place, person and voice, but, more particularly, in that the complexity of the constructed images plus words was sufficient to permit a variety of differing viewer responses. It seemed to us that images such as these might therefore be simultaneously positivist and constructivist, possibly thus challenging anyone's implicit binary conception of these labels.

One relevant element in our study was that a significant minority of our interviewees comprised Māori and Pasifika individuals. Since we as researchers were predominantly Pākehā (New Zealand European) sensitivity was needed to possible concerns about how we were to depict our participants. Because there may have existed some risk that persons of low literacy might feel objectified by our created images, we felt it necessary to focus on the dynamics of just how expressive content is formed in image-making.

A substantial body of literature exists in communication research and allied fields on visual depiction of groups that comprise minorities, or are actually or potentially subject to social exclusion of one kind or another. These include TV cartoons (Klein & Shiffman, 2006); TV commercials (Bang & Reece, 2003; Larson, 2002; Li-Vollmer, 2002; Mastro & Stern, 2003; Taylor & Stern, 1997); TV news (Dixon & Linz, 2000); films (Berg, 1990; Eschholz, Bufkin & Long, 2002); media images overall (Greenberg, 1982; Greenberg, Mastro & Brand, 2002; Harwood & Anderson, 2002; Mok, 1998; Power, Murphy & Coover, 1996); TV violence (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Hess et al., 1999; Kunkel et al., 1996); newspaper comics (Glascocock & Preston-Schreck, 2004); newspaper sports reporting (Hardin et al., 2004), or 'cultivation' effects of the media (Paik & Comstock, 1994; Signorielli & Morgan, 1990; Signorelli, Gerbner & Morgan, 1995).

Often such research first sets out to establish whether evident prejudice or negative sentiment is being expressed against minority or socially excluded groups. Then it seeks to explore the nature or extent of any such prejudice or exclusionary effects, following which it comments on the ways in which any negative impacts on such groups may occur. For example, Abraham and Appiah (2006, p. 183) described in their simulation of newspapers' news reports that:

Differential pictorial illustration of ethnic groups fostered differentiation association of ethnic groups with the social problem. Implicit racial images of Blacks helped prime racial stereotypes about Blacks and led to stronger association of Blacks with social problems addressed in the stories.

This is a typical example of a paper which explains what has been communicated by means of certain images, and the associations and correlations with racial stereotypes that appear to occur as a consequence. Yet in our overall survey of the literature we found it surprising that

to date little detailed attention seemed to have been paid to the mechanisms of how precisely expressive content in such media is either manufactured or communicated.

That is, while such studies describe how negative sentiment associated with expressive content may be evoked, they seldom provide insights into the dynamics by which this sentiment is engineered. We expected to find assessments of how particularities of visual and verbal composition combine to produce expressive content, but were not able to find such work in research in communication and related fields.

Other fields offered not many more insights. In the fields of literary studies, classics, music, semiotics and art studies, research addressing ekphrasis (e.g. Puff, 2006) or ekphrasis (e.g., Clements, 2001; Frosh, 2003) is of some value. Here typically attempts are made to assess means whereby one of two different arts (sometimes an image-based art and a word-based art) employs a rhetorical approach in order to form a relationship or implied connection between the two arts. In this way a bridge between art fields is created by an attempt being made within one art form to describe something that is held to capture the essence of an element within the other art form.

However, even in research of this nature the nature of the interplay between image and word is still not well defined or explained. Frosh (2003, p. 241) for example in describing linkages between image and word, comments on the “intractable” nature of the visual image and describes “its resistance to verbal description and to the totalizing aspirations of a linguistically 'biased' semiotics”. If it is correct that a research bias towards the spoken word tends to crowd out an understanding of the impact of the visual, then research such as in the present study is potentially of value.

We further became interested in the issue of how both negative and positive sentiment are created by images and words and promulgated by a combination of both visual and verbal means for two reasons. First, we wanted to explore the dimensions of negative expressive content to ensure that in our own image-making we did not unwittingly fall into the trap of producing anything which could be held to be deficit-oriented or negative in approach.

Second, we thought that an awareness of the dimensions of both negative and positive expressive content might help us to identify an obverse of negative expression, comprising realistic and positive expression. Possibly we could use this as a means of focusing ourselves in a way that was appreciative of strengths rather than appearing to be negatively disposed towards the characters in the images.

Expressive content has been seen as referring to the ‘affective content’ of an image, or perhaps more properly, a broadly defined affect response that a person viewing the image may experience. Taylor (1957, pp. 43-44) accounts for expressive content as being “the combined effect of subject matter and visual form”. This effect is presumably on some unspecified person or persons, but overall the definition is quite limited in respect of how expressive content is evoked, and silent on the issue of for whom it is produced. Rose (2001, p. 46) says “separate consideration of expressive content is necessary because breaking an image into its component parts ... does not necessarily capture the look of an image”.

Our problem with approaches to the definition of expressive content in ways such as this were that they seem to involve only an assessment of the images themselves (‘subject matter and visual form’ ... ‘the look of an image’), and do not appear to engage adequately with the

context surrounding them. Expressive content as defined and explained so far appears an insufficient account of how images ‘produce’ expressive content, unproblematised as it is in respect of who is doing the looking and possibly undergoing some kind of affect response.

As we began producing image-based accounts of our research findings to date, we started to realise that some further attempt to theorise those images was needed. We agreed with Hodge and Kress (1988), who considered that any perspective which sets out to legitimise a given form of social organisation is ideological. That is, it explicitly or implicitly posits normalcy for a particular world view, or what may be inferred as that world view from images presented to the onlooker. We realised the need to be self-reflexive by analysing our combination of place, people and voice in our production of nonverbal and verbal communication.

We were of course working within a particular socio-cultural context and were aware that in the minds of some, individuals of low adult literacy possess lesser social standing. Such persons may or may not be explicitly blamed for their low literacy, but they are seen to some degree as not full participants in society. Then certainly it is quite common for people of low literacy to feel shame and significant social exclusion on account of their inability to participate in functional literacy. It was not a formal element in our research to try to redress the balance, as it were, so that negative views of people of low literacy would be turned around. Yet this kind of orientation could well have been implicit in our approach.

Certainly it was quite evident to us that for our credibility in the community in which we were researching, we could not afford to be typecast as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. That is, all of our visual outputs had to be above reproach in embodying a strengths-based approach to local issues of low functional literacy rather than in any way suggesting a deficit interpretation of low literacy.

In this context therefore a characterisation of people with low functional literacy that is deficit and negatively-oriented is ideological. But we accept that our present initiative to present a counterbalance to that perspective is likewise ideologically charged and is in effect political in its attempt to delineate people of low adult literacy in ways that are positive.

We did not consciously set out to maximise expressive content of the images. Yet an aim to manage the expressive impact of what we produced may have been implicit in an intuitive or unconscious way in our brief to the illustrator. With the wisdom of hindsight it is probably the case that many of our images would rate highly for their expressive content which they arguably embody for many. An important part of this expressive content comes from what we see as the pathos inherent in the interplay between words and image. An additional source of expressive content comes from messages about research participants’ moral character that the reader may infer from the wording employed in the cartoon images.

The following table sets out some examples of both wording and putative moral character of the depicted individuals that may be inferred from the cartoons. The cartoon wording shown below was selected from our interview transcripts as representative of emergent themes. The originals can be seen at Literacy & Employment Research Posters (n.d.).

Table 1: Cartoon wording and production of expressive content

Cartoon wording	Expressive content potentially increased by displays or evidence of:
One thing my parents taught me was education is important	Good parental training, plus evidence that the character shown is responsive to parents
My auntie, she really gets aggro at me and moans and moans until I get to the course	Active family or whānau care and support
My social studies teacher ... just treated me with respect and vice versa	The individual's mature reflection on his life
My mum was always, to receive anything, you've got to go and get it	Having had training in being sturdily independent
I just thought it was time to get off my behind and tried to better myself	A person who is striving for individual success
My foster child, I couldn't help him really at school, so I thought, I've got to learn how to help him ...	Personal development inspired by the goal of service to others
My two best mates reckon it's primo	Values of collegiality and collective aspiration to achieve
I became second in charge because I could do all the projects	An ability to learn and build on previous experience
Sort of set my goal to come to class, and get that little bit of paper at the end	Individual goal-setting and drive

The table suggests a connection between a reader's possible perception of expressive content and certain social and community values such as those described or hinted at above. Expressive content thus seems to be produced by a cluster of factors including the appealing expression on or form of the person's face, the words used, and an evocation of community values to be inferred from the person's words. These community values include qualities of independence, little or no reliance on the state welfare system, an orientation to personal occupational success, strong family ties, and so on. Portrayal of these values of sturdy independence, as it were, formed a tacit counter-argument to what we thought of as some ingrained popular assumptions that people of low adult literacy were feckless, lazy, etc.

Therefore the creation of expressive content partially needs to be understood in a context of a set of values possessed by some individual or group. If there was an individual or group who did not subscribe to the cluster of qualities described above, or did not subscribe to them especially strongly, then the expressive content may not occur at all or may not occur to anything like the same extent. Such individuals might even reject the notion that the material 'possessed' expressive content or else they might feel that the images represented an attempt to manipulate them.

Some other of our cartoons relied partially for their expressive content on the pathos inherent in the individual's face, and also on the cumulative effect of face and words. A case in point is a person who appears to be a young Māori woman, saying, "A lot of kids out there don't believe in themselves" who is depicted in a very winning and attractive manner with a wistful expression on her face. The viewer might infer from her words and facial

expressivity that although commenting on others, she is in fact alluding to herself as well, and that by this means she is indicating a modest and uncomplaining demeanour.

The young man saying “I made the provincial reps, but my family didn’t have transport for training nights – this really bummed me out” is also attractively portrayed. He looks like a sportsman and appears staunch; although he is describing his feelings, nothing in the words or image contradicts a traditional heroic and idealised picture of a strong and resilient male.

The photographic backdrops of Wanganui against which our cartoon characters are portrayed also play some part in building expressive content. Some are quite iconic Wanganui street scenes, albeit employing a filtering effect so the background is not too predominant. By grounding our characters in easily recognisable Wanganui sites, they are portrayed as in and of the city, as participants and citizens, not as socially excluded persons.

With one exception, “These people just live off the benefit” (a derogatory and blaming quotation) we chose not to introduce any discordant perspectives into our presentation of place, people and voice. The reason we employed this particular image and set of wording was to acknowledge that it is not unusual for some social blame to be laid at the feet of the people of low functional literacy.

Yet presenting the concept in this way gave us an opportunity to contextualise the wording not least in respect of the way in which the media can simplify people’s life circumstances and put down those who are perceived as not pulling their weight. The person shown as speaking these words, though not demonised, was depicted in a somewhat unattractive manner as a rather angry-looking individual in late middle age. In this way we attempted to leverage off even negative and blaming terminology in an attempt to acknowledge and then counter what we deemed to be old and unhelpful stereotypes.

Images such as those employed above along with the social values with which they are loaded constitute an implied rebuttal on our part to anyone who might wish to claim that those of low functional literacy are to blame for their situation. The images that we depict, combined with the ‘ordinary citizen’ design of the people shown, construct voice and person as blameless and strong individuals who are striving to better themselves. As such we partake in a particular construction of people of low literacy in community and accept that our communicative intent is political.

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