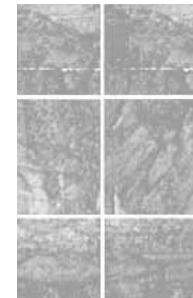


When words fail us: using visual composites in research reporting



FRANK X. SLIGO AND ELSPETH TILLEY
Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

This article describes a use of visual imagery in research reporting that helps to emphasize the human and social dimensions of research issues and encourage different ways of thinking about the findings and implications. During the literature review, in order to establish the authors' longitudinal research into adult literacy, they observed that research participants' own perspectives and rich life-worlds were usually invisible in final reports and articles, submerged under layers of governmental or scholarly discourse. An irony was that, while literacy theory was moving towards acknowledging multi-literacies, reporting of literacy research remained heavily mono-modal. The authors of this research wanted to differ from this trend by giving people who were affected by adult literacy policy a vivid presence within their reports. They were intrigued by the use of visual means to foreground interviewees' own words both as a way to register their importance to readers and to try to signal the multi-modal nature of literacy. They depicted their interviewees' words as language spoken by imagined individuals typical of the interviewees, grounded within photographs of their research site. In this article, the authors describe their intentions and methods in making their reports visual and artistic composites rather than more traditional densely worded policy reports; they deconstruct some of the key images contained in their report in order to critique their efficacy in achieving their aims.

KEY WORDS

adult literacy • cartoons • literacies • literacy policy • report writing • visual communication

INTRODUCTION

New Zealand's major governmental research funding body, the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology, commissioned our longitudinal study

of adult literacy and employment in the city of Wanganui in order to obtain comprehensive insights into the situation of people who were categorized as having 'low' functional literacy in English. A key goal of the programme was to supply decision makers and opinion leaders in New Zealand society (especially governmental policy makers) with research-based commentary on ways in which social policy aimed at increasing functional literacy levels could be improved. The main audiences for the research reports were those involved in designing or delivering literacy services and programmes, politicians (both government and opposition), and senior policy officials from government departments and agencies including the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Social Development, Department of Labour, and NZ Qualifications Authority, all of which had interests in discovering the strengths and weaknesses of current adult literacy training.

Importantly, this study featured close collaboration in planning and execution between ourselves as university researchers and researchers within several community organizations. In the lead community role was the Wanganui District Library, together with adult literacy providers especially Literacy Aotearoa (Whanganui), plus an indigenous educational authority, Te Puna Matauranga O Whanganui. Also involved were agencies such as the Police, the Corrections Department, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social Development, and the Tertiary Education Commission.

A range of information-gathering approaches was employed in this study, but the most important was a succession of interviews over three years with 90 people defined, through their participation in adult literacy training, as being of 'low' functional literacy in English. The local adult literacy training providers with which we were working recruited these participants for interviews in year one of the research programme and thereafter we attempted to stay in contact with them to permit further follow-up interviews.

As our interviews progressed, it became clear to us that the research was uncovering data that were far richer than we felt able to fully communicate with words alone. Many of our interviewees had had extraordinary life experiences and trusted us with harrowing stories of their circumstances. In our one-to-one interviews, their accounts had a significant impact on us. Their perspectives were emotional, powerful, complex, and personal. To do them justice, we needed to find new ways to represent data from the interviews to the policy makers with whom it was our task to communicate, as well as to politicians who were concerned about adult literacy. Moreover, we did not agree that people categorized as 'of low literacy' were necessarily lacking in the way that the term 'low' connotes. A label of 'lack' is defined by what is being measured and these participants' many other capabilities were not measured by literacy scales. We wanted to problematize this standard governmental 'deficit' terminology and its inherent privileging of print literacy. We felt that, ideally, our reporting should attempt to challenge that privileging in both form and content.

EXPLORING MULTI-MODAL REPORTING

Our first experiment in representing participants' viewpoints in our research reports as strongly and vividly as possible involved a pilot multi-media presentation. We used video to capture ad-lib statements from representatives of each of the research partners (not adult literacy training participants themselves at this stage), then briefed an editor to compile those statements, along with a graphic designer's titles for each segment, into a summary narrative. This tried to represent what each research partner felt was important to achieve from the research. At the first airing of this video among the research team, we immediately hit contested territory. One of the research partner representatives objected vehemently to the publication of her own statement after seeing it in the final context of the completed video, and some other partners also felt uncomfortable after seeing themselves speaking their own words. Video seemed a very unforgiving medium, too personalizing and too reductive, in their view. Those shown speaking felt that, during the production phases of editing and design, they had lost control over the meaning of their words to the extent that, while they did not necessarily disagree with what was being said, they no longer wanted their face shown speaking it. In light of these concerns, which we accepted as valid and important, the team decided not to make the video publicly available and not to use video for any other portion of the research reporting.

Ideally, we could have remade the video report from scratch, using participatory production processes – such as the examples of 'socio-cultural animation' described by Filewod and Watt (2001), in which workers were given video cameras and trained to script, film, edit, and produce their own audio-visual narratives of working conditions – to give consensus-based control to those whose viewpoints were reported. We see this as a desirable ideal, but it was not practical in the context of the funding grant's budgetary and reporting requirements, partners' disparate viewpoints, and our ability to commit time to the project. In the case of actual participants, privacy constraints made video use impossible. However, we remained committed to the idea that participants' own words needed to be at the forefront of our reporting.

The failure of our video reporting attempt demonstrated to us the tension between two of the key aims in our work. On the one hand, we wanted to ground the research reporting, like the research itself, in the communities which participated. Bearing in mind Harding's (2004) observation that 'the very best research, no less than the worst, does and should "speak" from particular, historically specific, social locations' (p. 4), we wanted to incorporate personal viewpoints in our reporting in order to subvert the 'downsizing of the human' that Berger (2005: 90) argues is endemic to information cultures. Yet, in doing so, we had to be mindful of what Archer (2002) calls the 'baggage' of literacy, that is, its hegemonic and contested history, and specifically the ways in which literacy has been an instrument of such downsizing of the human. We had failed to navigate that tension in the video but remained hopeful that some

form of visual communication might help us mediate, or at least express, that tension better than printed words alone. We next explicate some aspects of that tension which were underpinning and guiding the research and our reasons for thinking that visual communication might help address them.

POWER ISSUES

Our postcolonial context of research within Wanganui embodied particular challenges. Wanganui is a community of about 45,000 people with a long history of indigenous Māori settlement in pre-European times, and was the site of a town relatively early in the colonial period, in the early 1800s. We knew the potentially fraught nature of the work we were undertaking in that we were mainly Pākehā (New Zealand European) university researchers working within a community where a percentage of people with low functional adult literacy in English were Māori. In the view of Smith (1999), research is part of the colonization process to the extent that it seeks to define so-called 'legitimate' knowledge. She goes on to describe 'a deep distrust and suspicion of research' in Māori communities today, a distrust not least of the philosophy of research embodied in research conventions (p. 173).

This made our engagement with a research sample of people in literacy training complex and open to multiple interpretations. On the one hand, Smith (2005) comments that 'critical theorists have held out the hope that research could lead to emancipation and social justice for oppressed groups if research understood and addressed unequal relations of power' (p. 88). But, on the other hand, she then paraphrases Jordon (2003) in saying that 'the methodology of participatory research is being appropriated and reconstituted by neoliberal discourses of participation' (p. 95).

We worked with indigenous research partners for many sections of the research but for the interviews we took a less specific approach. Not all those of Māori descent or culture choose to identify as Māori, especially in a research environment. Therefore it would have been artificial to select or exclude any particular ethnicity from the interviews, as our collection point for the research sample was participants in adult literacy training, regardless of other demographic characteristics. For these interviews, then, we collected demographics as background information, but they played no role in our participant selection and did not influence our analysis, which followed a grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1992).

Nonetheless we were attuned to the power issues inherent in our research, particularly given that 'language is a fundamental site of struggle for postcolonial discourse because the colonial process itself begins in language' (Ashcroft et al., 1995: 283). We believed that issues of adult literacy in Wanganui bore some relationship to colonial processes there over the period of colonization since the early 19th century. Language is certainly a primary mechanism by which colonial assumptions and influence are promulgated,

while adult literacy training and adult education have a troubled provenance. A radical critique of adult literacy training and adult education exists, essentially holding that such training may fail to do justice to or demean its participants, or comprise another form of colonization. Some commentators believe that when colonizers insist that the colonized must become literate, this essentially comprises just another means of social control (see, for example, Lovett, 1988; Mayo and Thompson, 1995; McLaren, 1992–3; Shore, 2003; Thomas, 1982). Literacy's power dynamic has gender and class dimensions too: as Le Guin (2008) recounts: 'Literacy was not only a demarcator between the powerful and the powerless; it was power itself ... Every literate society began with literacy as a constitutive prerogative of the (male) ruling class' (p. 34).

On the flip side of this, however, it had become evident to us that many of our research participants had been gaining a deep sense of personal and community empowerment through participation in literacy training. They were using enhanced literacy skills to pursue their own goals, including goals of resistance to hegemony. Despite our concerns about literacy's neo-liberal baggage, we wanted to give voice and impact to our participants' perspectives on what their learning meant to them and how they felt it had changed their lives for the better, giving them confidence, purpose, and a sense of enhanced self-worth and achievement.

During our research we had also become dissatisfied with the institutional provision of support for people labelled as of low literacy. In our view, literacy was being defined in narrow, functionalist ways that took little account of the complexities of people's lives. Literacy programmes appeared rigidly geared to literacy learning alone, with no provision to help people overcome persisting contextual challenges that, in our view, had to be addressed before people could engage properly with learning. These included ill health, poverty, poor job prospects, social exclusion, addictions, low self-esteem, transience, isolation, family violence, and other issues that we referred to as 'life-world' factors (Tilley et al., 2007). It also became clear from our interviews that people defined as needing literacy training (often by government agencies which had referred them to training) frequently felt looked down upon and marginalized by the concept of a literate/illiterate divide. Literacy emerged as an issue clearly affecting the participants' whole person and their wellbeing in society, not just related to their points of intersection with particular social or economic institutions.

A ROLE FOR VISUAL COMMUNICATION?

Our thinking about the desirability of images followed from our observation that both the voices of people with low functional literacy and the reality of their lives, histories, and daily experiences were missing from literacy policy discussions. Berger (1972) observed that 'images were first made to conjure up the appearances of something that was absent' (p. 10). We did not want

our research reports to comprise just an elite talking to other elites about the socially excluded, as it were. We also wanted to bring in the range of other issues that participants told us were relevant to their literacy achievements, such as health, poverty, and childcare. But at the same time we knew that any such foregrounding of interviewees' words had to happen in ways that respected these people's right to privacy and were not exploitative, yet would bring often-unheard voices into the policy arena.

We concurred with Calvino's (1981) view of 'this world dense with writing that surrounds us on all sides' (p. 43), as well as Barthes' (1977) observation that 'it is not very accurate to talk of a civilization of the image – we are still, and more than ever, a civilization of writing' (p. 38). The government audiences for our policy research reports were indeed typically surrounded by dense thickets of words, being the object of intended influence from diverse interest groups and lobbyists who would represent an array of perspectives in adult literacy.

We also knew, as noted earlier, that so-called low literacy was not a theoretically neutral construct. A substantial body of literature draws attention to the need for researchers to re-think 'literacy' as literacies or multi-literacies (Gardner et al., 1996). Such terminology may open the door to better insights into how a person's capability in taking and making meaning should be understood within diverse forms of media, including visual media, and in the light of increasing linguistic and cultural diversity. Even if a person is not highly literate in a functional sense, such as in reading and writing English, in respect of social practice he or she may still possess deep insights into other forms of literacy such as environmental literacy or media literacy (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Cope and Kalantzis, 2000; Jackson, 2004).

We noted the increasing attention being paid to visual communication in the social sciences generally, as indicated in the points made by Bal (2005) that 'visuality has become central to cultural studies, perhaps to the humanities at large' (p. 155), and Harper (2005) that 'sociological research that relies on visual data is being published with increasing frequency' (p. 748). However, we were uncertain of appropriate theoretical antecedents that would permit us to contextualize our intended creation of visual images depicting our research participants. Researching literacy is already ethically challenging. Didactic overtones of an overt or covert nature may exist whereby people of low adult literacy are instructed to become more literate – but the nature of that literacy is usually defined by those who possess social and economic power. Likewise, the history of colonial image-making of colonized populations readily provides illustrations of colonizers' sentiments of wish-fulfilment, with the colonizers' fears and desires projected onto the images they have produced of the colonized (Bal, 1991; Goldie, 1989).

As Barnhurst et al. (2004) say, 'visual imagery influences ideas, ways of living, and pictures of the world' (p. 631) and 'the main subject matter for visual rhetoric is the marginal, minority, or at-risk population'. Or, 'texts are both socially-structuring and socially-structured' (Fairclough et al., 2001: 14).

We were concerned that some among our report audiences – policy officials in particular – might possess some negative (but possibly unconscious or latent) mental images of people who possessed low functional literacy. For this reason, we deliberately sought ways to perform representations of research participants positively. Following Reason and Hawkins (1988), what we sought was a representation of research enquiry that was multi-dimensional rather than unidimensional, collaborative rather than unilateral, holistic more than reductionist, and naturalistic more than structured. Thinking about characteristics of our previous research reports written for this and earlier research studies, they could well be said to be relatively unidimensional, unilateral, reductionist and structured. If such were weaknesses in a communication sense, then reports that possessed more than one mode, such as employing both print and illustrations, should have greater presence and perhaps be more effective in their outcomes. Reason and Hawkins observed that ‘to make meaning manifest though expression requires the use of a creative medium through which the meaning can take form’ (p. 81). This provided an impetus for us to consider creative visual images as an inventive way to permit fresh insights into our subject to emerge. We conducted a literature review to try to draw out the possible pros and cons, in a theoretical sense, of using images in this way. The next section summarizes the main findings of that review.

PROS AND CONS

On the one hand, our review of the literature on visual communication identified some very positive potential for the results of image making to communicate a sense of literacy as a multi-modal, complex, and contested issue. In her commentary on photographs by the artist James Coleman, for example, Bal (2003) draws attention to the multi-factored ways in which images impact upon the viewer. She describes the ‘simultaneity between the photographs and images and their appeal to the viewer’s entire body’ and the way in which ‘enigmatic discrepancies’ operate between the registers of photographs and text (p. 10). Such reference to discrepancies we found quite resonant: it conjured up both the sense in which literacy itself was a discrepant field, and our aim to recast the people we had interviewed in positive and empowering ways that would probably be discrepant with public stereotypes of ‘low literacy’.

In our attempts to theorize these interruptive aims, we found Hall’s (1999) work useful. He states that:

The symbolic power of the image to signify is in no sense restricted to the conscious level and cannot always easily be expressed in words. In fact, this may be one of the ways in which the so-called power of the image differs from that of the linguistic sign. What is often said about the ‘power of the image’ is indeed that its impact is immediate and powerful even when its precise meaning remains, as it were, vague, suspended-numinous. (p. 311)

We also found evidence suggesting that visual images may communicate our participants' emotional comment more strongly than words alone. Edwards (1987), for example, thought that the experience of intense emotions is closely associated with the formation and recall of visual imagery and sensations. In Edwards' view, people tend to organize and retrieve strong emotions in visual form, and visual imagery potentially conveys more emotion than words. Edwards describes how scientists and inventors will often recount how their most intense moments of inspiration are associated with strong visual imagery of some kind, but are less likely to be evoked by words.

According to Edwards, people's capacity to express their thoughts is improved if they combine verbal or analytical processes with visually-oriented thinking. Such insights reinforced our sense that visual imagery linking face and place, together with actual words derived from interviews with our respondents, would combine with greater impact than words alone.

On the other hand, we thought that the policy and political world that we were seeking to influence might possess some aversion to or uneasiness with the 'non-scientific' associations of visual communication. Bruner (1979) described how visual images tend to be excluded from empirical scientific publications and replaced by discursive accounts, even when a visual component has been important in scientific thinking. This is justified in order to represent findings in a 'more scientific' way. We might be regarded as patronising towards our subjects or lightweight in our findings in producing a highly visual text, almost resembling a comic book, depicting our research. After all, in the traditional Western hierarchy of cultural forms that privileges print (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001), some still hold the view that comics are not to be taken seriously, being situated somewhere within so-called 'low culture's' terrain. Therefore creative visual images might be questioned in respect of their ability to provide serious research feedback to policy specialists or interviewees. Bal (2003) commented that: 'In a culture where experts have high status and influence, expert knowledge thus not only enhances and preserves its objects, it also censors them' (p. 11).

In similar vein, Barnhurst et al. (2004), note the low regard for visual work in academic research generally, and Jay (1993) commented on how the influence and standing of vision in the academy have been undermined by linguistic reasoning. It occurred to us that possibly our (highly print-literate) policy audiences' approaches to analysis and decision making might be imbued with linguistically-based reasoning to the extent that they might be resistant to learning from visual images. Hillman (1975) distinguished between explanation and subjective experience, the latter to be drawn out via interpretation and understanding. Reason and Hawkins (1988) argued that, although 'creative expression is often relegated to the production of the beautiful or the entertaining', it also has validity as 'a mode of inquiry, a form of meaning-making, and a way of knowing' (p. 81). The issue for the current study was how best to communicate our participants' subjective experiences in a way

that would honour them and locate them in a place of primacy in accounts of our research.

We also considered the extent to which Foucault's thinking about normalization of populations (e.g. Foucault, 1980; Lacombe, 1996) might be relevant to our process. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) described processes of fostering social order, whereby institutional systems produced docile populations that were encouraged and intimidated into self-regulating their own lives. We reflected on whether our attempts to represent our interviewees' experiences as 'typical' for persons with low literacy in fact could mean we were attempting to impose a new model of normality or uniformity upon people of low functional literacy. Was there any risk of our research comprising an element of capitalism's endeavours to recast citizens into a desired social model of predictable consumers? As both citizens and researchers we held that a basic goal for us in doing community-based research was that our participants of low functional literacy deserved to be seen as equals of anyone who possessed literacy competencies. Yet we were also committed to the view that equality should embrace diversity rather than be part of an attempt to force such persons into a narrow social conformity. Ultimately, the need to include our participants' viewpoints emphatically and empoweringly outweighed our uncertainty as to exactly how this would be interpreted. We appreciated Bal's (2003) view that 'visual culture studies should take as their primary objects of critical analysis the master narratives that are presented as natural, universal, true and inevitable, and dislodge them so that alternative narratives can become visible' (p. 22). Multi-layered visual images – we have termed them composites for want of a better label although they might also be called 'cartoons' – could show words (taken from the interviews' textual record) represented as coming from the mouths of real people experiencing the stigma of 'low literacy' labels, and situated within a representation of the sites of their actual lives. Such visuals might comprise an appropriate alternative narrative to the norm of researcher elites talking to policy elites about the researched.

THE IMAGE-MAKING PROCESS

After considering these likely pros and cons, the research team decided on an attempt to visually depict our interviewees' words, derived from their interview transcripts, as spoken language uttered by pictured individuals who were typical of those whom we interviewed, yet unrecognizable as individuals. These represented people would be grounded within photographed Wanganui contexts familiar to residents of our research site. The goal was to convey social and community context through depictions of people living in their city. The pictures were therefore composite, comprising **voices** (verbatim words of interviewees of low functional literacy), **people** (derived from actual demographics, and from artistic judgements about how to embody people in a positive way, but not representing any specific individuals), and **place**

(background photographs of Wanganui). This composite of voices, people and place together, we felt, should have more impact than words alone.

Grounded analysis of our 90 interviews had suggested four major themes: barriers to literacy, barriers to employment, literacy needs, and conduits or pathways to literacy. We wanted to illustrate each of these in a reasonably detailed way, to provide a comprehensive overview of the interviewees' own concerns. We identified eight sub-themes for each theme, making a total of 32 perspectives that could be visually represented.

The themes were identified on the basis of frequency, and we selected particular quotations from participants' interview transcripts for illustration as typical, in our judgement, of the most common statements made on this theme. Then we attached the quotations arbitrarily to stylized images of generic 'people' (see later for several examples and see Literacy & Employment Research Posters [nd] for the complete image set).

Following requirements of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, which pays special attention to the needs of vulnerable populations, all our interviewees signed ethics consent forms and were advised of their rights, such as the ability to refuse to take part, to exit from an interview at any time, to decline to answer any question, etc. However, despite such measures, we felt that the participants were largely taking part in this activity on the researchers' terms, reminding us to closely interrogate the ethics of our situation.

If, as a generalization, images arguably possess more impact than the written word, then image-making might comprise potentially even more complex ethical territory than the language that Ashcroft et al. (1995) describe as a fundamental site of postcolonial struggle. Thus, using images of people with low literacy in reporting or other forms of feedback would possess particular challenges, in light of the contested nature of image-making in a postcolonial context.

As already noted, our research indicated that people labelled as having low literacy were often looked down upon and pushed to the margins in our society. Our instructions to the illustrator, Kerry Ann Lee, therefore emphasized a strength-based approach. The illustrations were intended to convey the ways that people may display resilience, persistence, and creativity in their everyday lives as they work around the limitations inherent in possessing low literacy in a culture which is placing an increasing premium on literacy. The illustrations were also intended to draw attention to the interviewees' insistence that a research approach (and therefore policy approaches) to literacy could not succeed in capturing the issues if it addressed adult literacy alone. People said literacy was enmeshed with their health, family environment, sense of self, and practical issues, such as finances and availability of transport or childcare, that could prevent their involvement in training. Interviewees also wanted us to report their concerns about their own schooling and that of the next generation, even though exploring school experiences was not an area we

were contracted to report on specifically. We followed the interviewees' lead, and included all these aspects as issues to be represented in our instructions to the illustrator. The next section presents five randomly selected images of the 32 that Kerry Ann produced from her interpretation of our instructions, and analyses their components.

'READING' THE IMAGES

This section provides one possible reading of the images, relating their visual elements to the aims and tensions outlined earlier. We drew our descriptive terminology for this reading largely from the 'grammar' of visual communication developed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006). Other readings are of course possible.

Kerry Ann Lee's images consist of a hierarchy of three layers, depicting the three components of each composite in decreasing order of importance: person, speech, and place. People are foregrounded, very much larger in scale than their photographic backgrounds, and usually foregrounded over the speech bubbles. Occasionally a speech bubble obscures a small portion of a person's clothing, as in Figure 1, but never covers any of the person's head, hair or face.

The colouring of the photographed places (the images' locative circumstances) is naturalistic, but slightly muted with a fading technique to ensure their softer, back-grounding effect. The represented people are in sharp focus. Although to our policy readers we hoped that the background settings were sufficiently 'everyday' to appear as generic 'anywhere' civic locales, to members

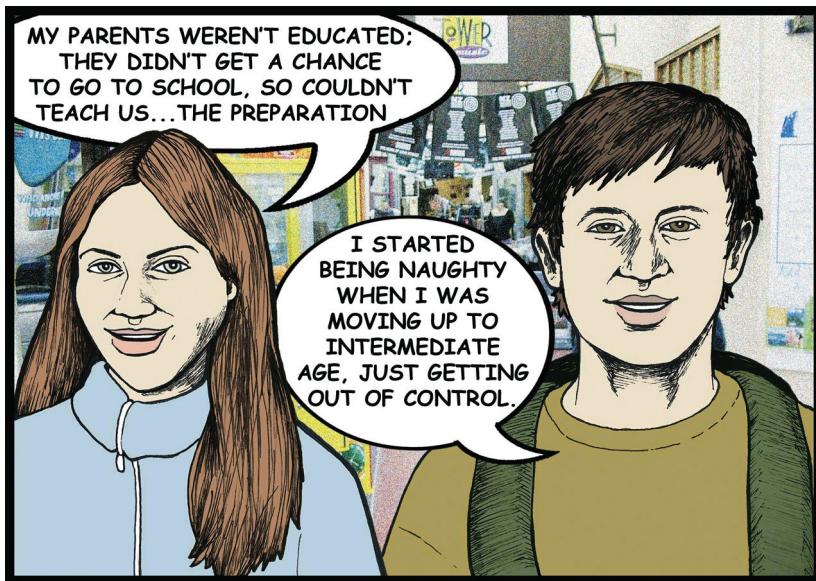


Figure 1 Image Kerry Ann Lee.

of the communities within which the research was conducted, the minimal use of muting and fading means they would still be recognizable as actual locations within their town. We wanted to communicate a sense to those of our research participants who accessed the reports that we had engaged with the ‘realness’ of their circumstances and experiences, and grounded ourselves in their home site, even though for privacy reasons the represented participants in the images could not be similarly naturalistic. The layers of the images thus may contain different messages for different readers.

In contrast to the faded setting, the colouring of the people uses stronger, more intense hues but within a limited and non-naturalistic palette of just a few specific, solid colours, which are repeated across the illustrations, giving the impression of a deliberate, unifying colour scheme. The effect of these colour choices is twofold: first to emphasize the importance of the human dimension through stronger colouring for people than background, but second to signal the ‘everyperson’ dimension of the represented people: these are intended to be generic human figures, emblematic of those who live with these kinds of challenges and issues. The non-naturalistic nature of the cartoons helps protect privacy by dissuading a tendency to infer that specific individuals who participated in the research might be identified in a given image. Sometimes, as in Figures 3 and 5, the colour of clothing matches the eye colour of the represented character, suggesting that eye colour is as much a design choice as an intention to signal a particular ethnicity. The designer had been asked to provide diversity, yet downplay stereotypical markers that may be interpreted as indicating any particular ethnicity. We wanted to



Figure 2 Image Kerry Ann Lee.

represent the broad collective diversity of our research group without singling out any particular cultural groups which may have participated. Likewise we did not want particular comments or viewpoints to be assumed to represent any particular ethnic or cultural standpoint, as all participants spoke as individuals. The depicted skin colours therefore vary, but are non-naturalistic because monotone, and often combine with other visual elements in ways that attempt to disrupt ethnic visual stereotypes, such as by pairing blue eyes with dark skin and hair.

The inclusion of verbatim quotations from the interviews as utterances inside speech bubbles within the images, rather than as captions additional to (i.e. below or outside) the images, has different possible communicative effects. First, it tends to extend rather than fix the potential meaning of the image. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) refer to cartoon speech bubbles in their discussion of Barthes' concept of 'relay' in which a textual element adds 'new and different meanings' to (as part of) an image 'to complete the message' rather than defining or interpreting ('anchoring') what occurs in the image (p. 18). In our case, to use captions rather than bubbles would have symbolically accorded definitional power over the images to the authors of the documents rather than to the pictured protagonists, which was the opposite of our intent. Second, the speech bubbles transform the people pictured in the images from static to dynamic and immediate: by the addition of visually rendered speech utterances they are depicted in the act of speaking at the moment of image-making. This supports our aim of bringing the participants alive for policy readers.



Figure 3 Image Kerry Ann Lee.



Figure 4 Image Kerry Ann Lee.

This political manoeuvre to confront readers with the lived human dimension of literacy is further supported by the perspectives used in the images. Because of the directness of their gaze, which is often straight out of or almost straight out of the image, and the close-up size of the frame, the participants are often speaking closely, confrontationally even, to the reader. Their gaze is often at the same level or higher than the gaze of the reader. This is a politicized characteristic of the images, as opposed to a naturalistic characteristic, as often those interviewed looked down, or otherwise avoided looking their interviewer directly in the eyes during the interview, and may not have considered it polite or culturally appropriate to do so. They certainly were not spatially positioned in close-up proximity to their interviewers when they originally spoke the utterances, nor would they normally stand at close personal distance to the implied readers of the reports. For our purposes of disrupting policy paradigms, however, including the direct and 'demanding' (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006) close-up gaze of those affected by policy was a cultivated effect. In hindsight, we probably did want to make policy makers slightly uncomfortable, and we were intending to create a shift in their thinking about literacy. The 'in your face' gaze of many of the represented characters is intensified because the figures are drawn at close personal distance (showing only the face and a small portion of torso) and facing the viewer at frontal or near-frontal angle. Also, even though some of the images contain more than one person, the represented characters seem not to be directly communicating with each other – their interaction is primarily with the implied viewer.



Figure 5 Image Kerry Ann Lee.

If the carefully arranged compositional structure of these images implies a narrative, as Kress and Van Leeuwen suggest (2006), then in images where the gaze is direct, the vector of action flows from the pictured characters to the viewer. (A vector between elements shows those elements '*doing* something to or for each other' [p. 59], meaning that if we understand the vector as flowing out of these pictures, the responsibility for continuing the narrative action now lies with the viewer.) There is a sense, then, in which the frank gazes from the visual images constantly ask readers of the reports' accompanying textual content 'And what happens next?', meaning a need for active response is asserted. As Kress and Van Leeuwen describe: 'the frontal angle is the angle of maximum involvement. It is oriented towards action' (p. 145).

Additionally, attributing speech to pictured individuals through the use of speech bubbles personalizes the images. Each utterance, although separated from its original utterer, here reconnects with a represented human being, evoking a sense of real lives lived before, after, and around the fragmentary snippets of spoken information in a way that would not have been possible with captions or explanatory text positioned outside the image that would have separated the information from the represented participants. Again, this sense of personalization is reinforced by framing the represented human figures at close personal distance, which in interpersonal relations implies a first-hand social connection, and from a level perspective. Some minor variations in angle height exist (in some pictures we can see chin and no top-of-head, but in others some top-of-head is visible); however, the

represented participants are mainly drawn neither significantly higher nor lower but at eye-level with the viewer, suggesting a relationship of equality (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006).

Finally, the sequencing of images and text within the reports was an attempt to communicate particular meanings. Kress and Van Leeuwen argue that, in a double-page spread, verbal text items on the left page usually imply what is already known and accepted, with new or unexpected information introduced in 'graphically salient' visuals on the right (p. 179). We inverted this sequencing, placing full-page width visual images, which were new and unexpected in the context of a research report for policy audiences, at the top centre of left-hand pages, and the explanatory text, which tended to contextualize the images' messages in the more familiar (to our audience) context of existing literacy theory and policy, below and on the right. The margins of the text were narrower than the margins of the image. Again these design choices constituted an attempt to signal the importance of people by placing them in the position where they would be read first by our audiences and would continue to dominate the page even when the eye moved to the text. We hoped thereby to subvert what we perceived to be the usual assumption, that people's lives are the unseen objects of policy rather than its guiding force and *raison d'être*.

We next reflect on the efficacy of these images to our communication aims.

REFLECTION: DID THE VISUAL IMAGES ACHIEVE OUR AIMS?

According to Schirato and Webb (2004):

If a picture paints a thousand words, it is also true to say that it may be read in a thousand ways, and tell myriad stories, because pictures are always open to personal interpretation, and relatively inaccessible to any who lack very specific literacies. (p. 98)

Our images privileged some specific literacies of our interviewees; a shared understanding of the experiences of being of low literacy, for example, and a recognition of Wanganui sites as having particular local meaning. These were literacies from which policy readers may be excluded. However, we also attempted to limit a multitude of interpretations by focusing readers on the repeated intersections of voices, people and place, in ways that we thought were appropriate to our purposes of motivating policy makers to understand, perhaps even unconsciously, that the human and social dimensions of literacy are inseparable.

Harper (2000) has observed that 'the social power involved in making images redefines institutions, groups, and individuals' (p. 717). We knew that we as researchers were managing the process whereby the images were

produced. The words to be illustrated were those of participants in adult literacy classes, but were spoken in response to questions formulated by researchers. Also, it was the researchers who selected those words and that selection was made on the basis of our judgements about salience in what we defined as the situation of low functional literacy, and as being typical of other comments made by this group.

As noted, the comments to be illustrated were mediated by the researchers' judgements, and then by the aesthetic judgements of the illustrator; those judgements including decisions about how to depict the persons talking (age, apparent ethnicity, clothing, facial expressions, etc.). The researchers had supplied Kerry Ann, the illustrator, with certain expectations about how to shape those decisions. So 'social power' in Harper's terms could be seen as an amalgam of respondents' words, mediated by researchers' selection of just some words from the interview transcripts (and rejection of others) along with artistic choices about how to depict the saying of those words.

We asked this question: if the mastery of words privileges the literate middle and upper classes, would depiction of experiences via pictures in any way provide a counterbalance for participants who lack power? As already acknowledged, we asked this with awareness that 'participation ... is always itself part of an operation of power' (Quaghebeur et al., 2004: 156). In our respondents' participation in this research, regardless of our full compliance with standard university human ethics requirements – such as informed consent and ability to exit or decline to answer – there was no idealized state of full and free collaboration.

Nevertheless, images such as those employed and illustrated in this article, along with the social values with which they are loaded, constitute an implied rebuttal on our part to anyone who might claim that those of low functional literacy are to blame for their situation. The voices that we depicted, combined with the 'ordinary citizen' design of the people shown, constructed voice and person as blameless and strong individuals who faced challenges courageously. As such, we partook in a particular and political intent to construct new discourse around people with low literacy, in which they were seen less as isolated unique victims and more as normalized members of our community with particular attributes of strength and perseverance in spite of oppression.

In short, we had an interventionist set of intentions. We sought to maximize what might be seen by framing these constructed images in particular ways. Reflecting on Foucault's (1977) view of 'normalization' referred to earlier and then revisiting the illustrations leads us to the view that perhaps the individuals as depicted were more idealized to mainstream aesthetic values than their real-life counterparts might have been. For example, none was depicted as obese and few as overweight, contradicting indications of predictable body size to be gained from national or local statistics. None had scars, tattoos, facial piercings, skin conditions, or hair loss. All wore neat, clean,

'mainstream' style clothing without logos or patterns. Their facial expressions were neutralized – almost smiling, in most cases, and certainly not signalling anguish or anger, even when relating distressing circumstances or describing experiences of discrimination. They were, in effect, blander and more 'conventional' in appearance than the likely reality of any group of people's diverse and individual appearances. Thus they lacked both visual markers of sub-cultural belonging and any unique statements of cultural and personal identity expressed in visual appearance.

Under what conditions, then, might it be acceptable for us to present visually a more idealized and 'mainstreamed' representation of our participants than accorded with likely statistical actuality? To answer this question, we needed to draw a distinction between different readers and viewers of our research outputs. In the instance of policy officials and politicians, we determined that it was probably acceptable for us to promulgate a slightly idealized picture of our interviewees, given our affirmative political and interventionist stance described earlier.

Then, for purposes of feedback to participants, were we to use the constructed images in succeeding interviews with them? We similarly arrived at the view that the same somewhat idealized view was appropriate, in light of what we understood from interviews to be the low self-esteem possessed by many. Had our images appeared too incongruent with predominant media images of successful, happy, well-groomed people, this, we thought, would run the risk of actively undermining these participants or appearing to pigeonhole them as 'different' or marginal. Therefore, on balance, we thought that a Foucauldian-style analysis of destructive normalization was important for us to consider, but did not seem to indicate unacceptable practice on our part in this instance. Overall, we felt that our three communicative modes of voice, people, and place in fact came together in a way that we believed might trigger the desired positive response from our policy audiences. Examining her study of political cartoons, El Rafaie (2003) remarked that one of its most interesting findings was its exploration 'of the relationship between a visual metaphor and its verbal context' (p. 91). In our policy reports, we sought to build an equally complex set of relationships between voice, people and place in pursuit of our interventionist aim that policy readers see people with 'low' literacy not as distant 'other' objects but as present subjects – as someone who might live next door.

An anecdote from our illustrator helped us to suspect that we may have made progress towards our aim: she told us that, after she had finished drawing the series of characters, which she did not base on any real human models, she suddenly 'kept seeing them crop up in everyday places, like on the bus' (Kerry Ann Lee, personal communication, July 2007). To us, this suggested that her created visual characters were indeed effectively normalized as ordinary and unremarkable, yet still real and human in form. Likewise, the reception accorded one research report in particular seemed to indicate that

the images were successful in seizing readers' imaginations. This report, called *Voices* (Tilley et al., 2007), prompted more positive comments and a larger volume of feedback than any other report. Additional copies were requested by community partners for distribution in Wanganui, and they described it as 'the research equivalent of a best-seller' (Bob Dempsey, personal communication, 3 April 2008). *Voices* was in fact the report with the fewest words and greatest number of pictures. Although most of the reports had some images, it was the only report in which every double-page spread contained a half-page, cartoon-style, full-colour image. It was also the only report, of 26, to require a second print run.

CONCLUSION

How might our reporting be improved in the future? Important to us would be ways to build further positivity around the situation of people defined as being of low functional literacy in English. Almost certainly, any such outcomes could be better achieved were we able to get more intensive involvement with participants in literacy learning, and to obtain from them even further data as to their own insights into their life situations. Yet our opportunities to work with these quite mobile individuals tended to be restricted. Therefore the time that we did have to spend with them had to be used to best effect. Of critical importance was to get their insights into substantive issues, such as conduits into literacy learning, which we believe we did achieve. On such topics, knowledge derived directly from participants such as ours has historically been rare internationally.

Although the ethics implicit in our processes remained somewhat opaque to us and we had more questions than answers, we felt that our approach had some originality, and in some ways raised questions about possible future directions in policy reports. Bal (2005) has raised the issue of whether 'it is possible to deploy art not only as reflection, but also as a form of *witnessing* that alters the existence of what it witnesses' (p. 157, emphasis in original). We accepted that (assuming we had arrived at what could be construed as art) a political element was implicit in our intentions and that our form of witnessing contained possibilities in respect of how our research participants were to be seen.

Do visual images document and explain, or express? Through depicting interviewees' voices, we hoped simultaneously to document their circumstances, to express a point of view on how their situations might be ameliorated, and to add a new, deliberately positive, discourse to the many negative discourses already surrounding their circumstances. We also needed to consider the making of images as another manifestation of text that potentially might have a disempowering outcome for people in our research sample. We anticipated eventual benefits to participants from this process, through the foregrounding of human dimensions while at the same

time preserving individual privacy, but thought that our intentions may be insufficient. Does an awareness that scholarship unavoidably ‘partakes of the ideological constructs it seeks to criticize’ (Bal, 1991: 26), enable the positive potential of image-based research feedback to outweigh the limitations? Or, in problematizing the steps we have taken to create these images, is our critique of our visual practice ‘a secondary reaction which in fact legitimises [our] gaze’ (p. 25)? We had built our reports around composites of voice, people and place, with the aim of motivating readers to perceive, perhaps even unconsciously, two key shifts in typical literacy discourse and our reporting of it. These were, first, that communication (and therefore the skills of ‘literacy’ that society needs to recognize and value) comprise far more than words alone. Second, the human dimensions of ‘literacy’, the people whose lives are affected by literacy programmes and policies, are not always able to be easily or appropriately presented in words alone. Yet they are inseparable from and crucial to any consideration of the issue, whether from a research, policy, or educational perspective. Incorporating visual images into our research reports helped us, we believe, with communicating and achieving both these aims.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

FRANK X. SLIGO has a PhD in information richness and poverty, and his research is in adult literacy, community consultation and the knowledge-behaviour gap.

Address: Department of Communication and Journalism, Massey University, PO Box 756, Wellington, New Zealand. [email: F.Sligo@massey.ac.nz]

ELSPETH TILLEY has a PhD in postcolonial studies and her research is in adult literacy, communication ethics, postcolonial discourse and public relations.

Address: Department of Communication and Journalism, Massey University, PO Box 756, Wellington, New Zealand. [email: E.Tilley@massey.ac.nz]