

**F.X. SLIGO  
E.N. TILLEY  
N. CULLIGAN  
M.A. COMRIE  
F. VACCARINO  
J. FRANKLIN**

**Massey University, Wellington and Palmerston North, New Zealand  
F.Sligo@massey.ac.nz**

## ***Picturing words: Illustration-based research feedback to persons of low literacy***

### **Abstract**

In a major, longitudinal study of adult literacy and employment, we sought new ways to represent data from interviews with people of “low literacy” in English to policy-makers and politicians. Following Reason (1988), we sought to create research feedback that was multidimensional not unidimensional, collaborative not unilateral, holistic not reductionist, and naturalistic not structured. Using photographic backgrounds of our research site, Wanganui, New Zealand, a professional illustrator depicted representations of a range of ‘people’ speaking the actual words that people of low literacy had spoken in earlier interviews. Our aims were to document their experiences and find ways in which interviewees’ words might be more influential in social outcomes in our reports to funding and government agencies, and so bring their points of view to a prominent place in the forefront of the research. At the same time, we acknowledged issues with what Bal (2005) calls the ‘ethics of vision’. It was important to voice and foreground interviewees’ words in ways that would respect their rights and not be exploitative. We remain ambivalent about whether this visual form has achieved all of our aims. This paper gives an account of what we saw as our political, interventionist approach. Future research will provide the participants’ own perspectives on the visual representations of their words.

### **Introduction**

In a major, longitudinal study of adult literacy and employment, we sought new ways to represent data from interviews with people of “low literacy” in English to policy-makers in adult literacy and politicians who were concerned about literacy. While conducting interviews with 90 people of low functional literacy in English who were participants in adult literacy classes, we had become interested in the problem of how these people’s perspectives and points of view, as adduced from transcripts of their actual words, could be represented in our research reports as strongly and vividly as possible. We saw the possibility of using visual means to foreground interviewees’ words and perspectives and signal their importance to readers of our reports, especially policy and political decision makers who often make decisions at a remove from the human faces of issues. Images of people could potentially convey key ideas and perspectives, and we had noted Brilliant’s (1991) comment that “the human face is not only the most important key to identification based on appearance, it is also the primary field of expressive action” (p. 153).

Analysis of the 90 interviews 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 four 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 which could be visually represented.

Harper (2000) observed that “the social power involved in making images redefines institutions, groups, and individuals” (p. 717). We hoped that our institution of community-based research, and the individuals of low English literacy with whom we were working, might both find a degree of positive redefinition via the images we set out to construct. Of course we as researchers were directing and managing the processes of image production. Although the themes were identified on the basis of frequency, we selected the particular words for illustration as, in our judgement, salient in the context of low functional literacy in English, and typical of comments made by this group. Then we attached them arbitrarily to stylised images of generic ‘people’. We anticipate eventual benefits to participants from this process, but acknowledge that our intentions may be insufficient. Does an awareness that scholarship unavoidably “partakes of the ideological constructs it seeks to criticize” (Bal, 1991, p. 26), enable the positive potential of image-based research feedback to outweigh the limitations? Or, in problematising 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” (Bal, 1991, p. 25)?

### **Voices, people and place**

Berger has suggested that “downsizing of the human” (2005, p. 90) is endemic to information cultures. During our data-gathering, however, it became clear that the human factors were crucial. Many of our interviewees had had extraordinary life experiences and trusted us with harrowing stories of their circumstances. Literacy emerged as

an issue clearly related to the whole person and their wellbeing in their social context, not just related to their points of intersection with particular institutions. These human insights deserved to be well represented in the reports we were writing for government agencies. One of the communicative aims of our research reporting was to demonstrate literacy as a social practice. As Shore comments:

this view moves beyond simplistic understandings of literacy as a functional skill, or indeed something people don't have, to views which encourage research and teaching based on the ways in which learners (and indeed practitioners) might use literacy as part of their everyday lives. This view of literacy takes account of the cultural practices, local contexts and historical patterns shaping literacy use and, in my view, is an improvement on functional approaches" (2003, para. 1).

Our visuals were an attempt to embody these 'everyday' elements of the literacy stories we collected as densely as possible in the research feedback, even in very formal outputs such as policy reports. We also sought to convey an impression of social and community context through depictions of life in Wanganui, our research site. 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, some of iconic sites, of Wanganui). In a sense, then, this follows Harper's (2005) observation that "visual documentation becomes a part of research triangulation, confirming theories using different forms of data" (p. 748).

Berger (1972, p. 10) observed that "images were first made to conjure up the appearances of something that was absent." Our illustrations followed from our observation that the voices of people with low functional literacy were not present in literacy policy discussions. We did not want our research reports just to comprise an elite group discussing the socially excluded, as it were. But at the same time we knew that any such foregrounding of interviewees' words would need to happen in ways that respected these people's right to privacy and was not exploitative. While the images would bring often-excluded voices into the policy arena, they may also risk narrowly reinterpreting the words in particular ways, creating a great deal of mediation between those speaking and those reading.

We were uncertain of appropriate theoretical antecedents for this which would permit us to contextualise our visual practice. Researching literacy is an ethically challenging field, such as where literate academics and other experts are researching adults with low functional literacy, perhaps with didactic overtones of an overt or covert nature that such people need to become more literate. Researching literacy in a postcolonial society is particularly challenging, as there are added layers of power and resistive practice that need to be acknowledged (see for example Shore, 2003). A radical critique of literacy exists, with some commentators arguing that when colonisers insist that the colonised must become literate, this essentially comprises just another means of social control (see for example McLaren, 1992-93; Adam, 1996). Likewise, the history of colonial image-making of colonised populations readily provides illustrations of colonisers' sentiments of wish-fulfilment, with the colonisers' fear and aggression arguably evident in the images they have produced of the colonised (Bal, 1991; Goldie, 1989).

We noted the increasing attention being paid to visual communication in the social sciences, as indicated in the point made by Bal (2005) that "visuality has become central to cultural studies, perhaps to the humanities at large" (p. 155), or Harper (2005) that "sociological research that relies on visual data is being published with increasing frequency" (p. 748). Yet we were aware that pictures are not unproblematic either, for example, we might be regarded as patronising in producing what was essentially a visual text, almost a comic book, depicting our interviewees. After all, some hold the view that comics are not to be taken seriously and are positioned somewhere within "low culture's" muddy terrain that high-culture aficionados might normally shun. Therefore picture books might be questioned as able to provide serious research feedback to policy specialists or interviewees. We felt that Bal's (2003) observation was relevant:

visibility is also a practice, even a strategy, of selection that determines what other aspects or even objects remain visible. 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 our view, so-called expert perspectives (*literate* perspectives) on adult literacy were well represented in national policy and funding decisions. We were less clear how the important perspectives of people of low functional literacy were currently being taken into account. Our hope was that the combination of words and pictures might create a more inclusive and complex mode of research feedback.

### **Our cultural field(s)**

Shirato and Webb (2004) note that:

visual texts are not just wallpaper, but are always the stuff of communication. However, they do not communicate objectively or in a vacuum, and any instance of visual (or linguistic) communication is invested in what Pierre Bourdieu calls the 'cultural field' in which the communication is made, and in which it is analysed (p. 67).

We understood our cultural field as comprising community-based research carried out by university and community researchers. It also included policy studies, given we were required, as a condition of funding, to provide research outputs for consideration by government decision makers on adult literacy policy. Primary audiences for this particular report were senior policy decision makers in several different government departments (each of which would have its own standpoint on the issues we were addressing) and politicians from all sections of the political spectrum.

This array of 'experts' casts a long shadow, in which connection we could appreciate Bal's view that "visual culture studies should take as its 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" (2003, p. 22). Although our cartoons were literally putting words in the mouths of our depicted individuals, at least those words did originally belong to persons of low functional literacy in English, and as such might comprise an appropriate alternative narrative.

### **Echoing mimesis?**

By grounding the actual words used by respondents within photos of Wanganui sites, and by depicting individuals in the light of general interviewee demographics, we may be interpreted as advancing a claim that our visual communication possessed a basis in "reality." Yet we knew that we were not "communicating objectively" with our audiences. Rather, we were using a visual device to influence how policy audiences in particular might react to the conclusions we had drawn, especially our conclusion that literacy policy needed to shift from focus on functionality to focus on humans in context (Sligo, Comrie, Olsson, Culligan, & Tilley, 2005). We wanted to encourage a shift in governmental thinking away from a dependency on 'hard' or 'real' data about quantitative literacy outcomes to a more interpretative, qualitative approach embracing human dimensions that were harder to measure. We felt that the ambiguity and multiplicity of the visual images helped model that conceptual shift.

Shirato and Webb (2004) state that:

We can identify an idea about reality and visual culture that has been central to theories of visuality and culture across Western history. Its basis is the ancient Greek notion of *mimesis*, or the imitation (the reproduction) of reality, which in effect posits that the objects we see are only imitations of an ideal form ... their role is to recall to us the ethical ideal of which they are the mimesis (or imitation) and to relay that ideal into the everyday world (p. 71).

We also had in mind Rajchman's (1988) view (following Foucault) of "a sort of 'positive unconscious' of vision which determines not what is seen, but what can be seen" (in Bal, 1996, p. 272). Our research indicated that people of low literacy were often looked down upon and marginalised in our society. Our brief to the illustrator emphasised a strength-based approach, with the illustrations intended to emphasise the ways that people often display resilience and creativity in their everyday lives as they work around the limitations inherent in possessing low literacy in a culture which is highly literate and which is placing an increasing premium on literacy. We therefore saw ourselves as attempting to recast images of people with low functional literacy with the possibility of their being re-imagined in more inclusive ways than is sometimes the case.

### **Beyond words?**

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 (Hall, 1999, p. 311).

Hall's commentary on symbolic power suggests a further effect from deploying visual expression. When reporting on research findings, we could have (and elsewhere have) inserted in the text of our reports more detailed lists of the verbatim words used by interviewees with low functional literacy in order to illustrate an argument or point. However, the present use of images was an attempt on our part to increase the immediacy and power of interviewees' words, rather than use them in traditionally 'literate' ways.

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, quite deliberately, literacies from which the 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 at an unconscious level, that the human and social dimensions of literacy are inseparable and crucial.

Berger (2005) suggests that:

when an insight brought back from an intuitive foray seems to stand up, hold water, or prove its paces, we are in the face of what can properly be termed an original work. True originality is never something sought after or, as it were, signed; rather, it is a quality belonging to something touched in the dark and brought back as a tentative question (p. 87).

Thus 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 prospects of achieving something original and potentially valuable. Bal (2005) has raised the possibility 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), and we accepted that (assuming what we had arrived at could be construed as art) a political element was implicit in our intentions.

### Portraits

Brilliant (1991) observed that “portraits make value judgements not just about the specific individuals portrayed, but about the general worth of individuals as a category” (p. 14). He also noted “the oscillation between art object and human subject, represented so personally, is what gives portraits their extraordinary grasp on our imagination” (p. 7). For the purposes of this discussion we assumed that our drawn images may be accurately designated as portraits.

In her commentary on photographs by the artist James Coleman, Bal (2003) draws attention to the multi-factored ways in which images can impact upon the viewer, so that (in Coleman’s case):

far from the photographs illustrating the text or the words ‘explicating’ the images, the simultaneity between the photographs and images and their appeal to the viewer’s entire body operates by means of the enigmatic discrepancies between these two main registers (p. 10).

In our instance, the inclusion of ‘cartoons’ in a ‘policy report’ was likely to automatically provide stimulus in the form of discrepancy for an audience accustomed to a particular text-based report genre. In and between the images themselves, we did not seek to set up discrepancies, but instead wanted to focus voices, people and place in a cohesive alignment, again with the aim of increasing impact on the viewer. We felt leverage could be obtained from employing a sequence of related frames with the possibility of the whole telling a narrative story that was greater than the sum of its parts.

This was suggested in part by an understanding of the power of narrative forms in our culture (see for example Todorov, 1977) and partly by what Bhabha (1994) called *seriating*, being attempts to analyse the impact when objects are brought together in particular ways to form new series and make different kinds of statements. In a way, then, our collection of images in series had the potential of constructing a kind of imagined community of people with low functional literacy in English, whose words provided explanations of and insights into their situation.

We saw our activity in employing these images in an unexpected context as an attempt to tinker with the conventional manner in which literacy issues and people of low literacy are regarded. Within a context where people of low functional literacy in English are not really accepted as equal citizens, possibly pitied, probably looked down upon, we sought to challenge such perspectives, and question the tacit values and dispositions that underlay and motivate them. Anyone’s values are, of course, normally resistant to change, but we would not argue that they are impossible to change. Should sufficient impact occur via our images along with the plausibility of the text that accompanied them in our reports, papers and posters, we had aspirations of modifying, to an extent, values and dispositions held by some viewers of the images. If we had believed that viewers’ values and dispositions were largely resistant to change, creation of these images would have been pointless, and probably our research as a whole likewise.

Nevertheless, 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, p. 156). In the participation by our respondents in this research study, there was, regardless of our full compliance with standard university human ethics requirements such as informed consent and ability to exit or decline to answer, no idealised state of full and free collaboration.

### Explaining, expressing, or both?

Do visual images document and explain, or express? Through depicting interviewees' comments we hoped both to document interviewees' circumstances, and to express a point of view on their situations. James Hillman has distinguished between explanation and subjective experience, the latter to be drawn out via interpretation and understanding: "My soul is not the result of objective facts that require explanation; rather, it reflects subjective experiences that require understanding" (in Reason & Hawkins, 1988, p. 80; see also Barnhurst, Vari & Rodriguez, 2004).

We wanted to find ways to link explanation and analysis to expression and interpretation. A research report that featured explanation and analysis alone would, we felt, fail to convey the powerful expression of our interviewees. Depicting interviewees' words in conjunction with visual images might both tap into and amplify their expression, and at the same time permit interpretation grounded within a particular context. In this way we hoped via these images to provide a bridge between explanation and expression, possibly with the prospect of enhanced understanding consequent upon readers' recognition of the validity of voices, people, and place as crucial to the research. We felt this conjunction might comprise both a mode of enquiry and a way of knowing, providing, ultimately, a means of looking through these illustrations at something else.

## References

- Adam, I. (1996). Oracy and literacy: A postcolonial dilemma? *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 31 (1), 97-109.
- Bal, M. (1996). *Double exposures; The subject of cultural analysis*. New York: Routledge.
- Bal, M. (1991). The politics of citation: Using and abusing images of native women in postcolonial critical analyses. *Diacritics; A Review of Contemporary Criticism*, 21 (1): 25-45
- Bal, M. (2003). Visual essentialism and the object of visual culture. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2, 5-32.
- Bal, M. (2005). The commitment to look. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 4, 145-162.
- Barnhurst, K.G., Vari, M. & Rodriguez, I. (2004). Mapping visual studies in communication. *Journal of Communication*, 54, 616-644.
- Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of seeing*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Berger, J. (2005). A Jerome of photography: The camera as an instrument of knowledge. *Harper's Magazine* 311 no. 1867, 87-90, December.
- Bhabha, H.K. (1994). *The location of culture*. London: Routledge.
- Brilliant, R. (1991). *Portraiture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Goldie, T. (1989). *Fear and temptation: The image of the indigene in Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand literatures*. Kingston; Montreal; London: McGill-Queen's UP.
- Hall, S. (1999). Looking and subjectivity: Introduction. In J. Evans and S. Hall (Eds.). *Visual culture; The reader*. Sage: London.
- Harper, D. (2000). Reimagining visual methods: Galileo to Neuromancer. In Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (Eds.). *Handbook of qualitative research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). Thousand Oaks: Sage, pp. 717-732.
- Harper, D. (2005). What's new visually? In Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (Eds.). *Handbook of qualitative research* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed). Thousand Oaks: Sage, pp. 747-762.
- McLaren, P. (1992-93) Critical literacy and postcolonial praxis: A Freirian perspective. *College Literature* 19-20, 7-27.
- Quaghebeur, K., Masschelein, J. & Nguyen, H.H. (2004). Paradox of participation: Giving or taking part? *Journal of Community & Applied Psychology*, 14, 154-165.
- Rajchman, J. (1988). Foucault's way of seeing. *October*, 44, Spring, 89-117. Cited in Bal, 1996.
- Reason, P., & Hawkins, P. (1988). Storytelling as inquiry. In *Human inquiry in action; Developments in new paradigm research*. Peter Reason (Ed.). London: Sage.
- Schirato, T. & Webb, J. (2004). *Understanding the visual*. London: Sage.
- Shore, S. (2003). What's whiteness got to do with it? Exploring assumptions about cultural difference and everyday literacy practices. *Literacies: Researching practice, practising research*. Issue 2 (Fall). Available at: <http://www.literacyjournal.ca/literacies/2-2003/practice/2/1.htm> (07.09.06)
- Sligo, F., Comrie, M., Olsson, S., Culligan, N., & Tilley, E. (2005). Barriers to adult literacy: A discussion paper. Department of Communication and Journalism, Massey University, New Zealand. ISBN 0-9582646-0-0. Series: Adult Literacy and Employment in Wanganui, 0501. ISSN 1176-9807
- Todorov, T. (1977). *Poétique de la prose* (R. Howard, Trans.). Oxford: Blackwell.