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The value of images: using pictures and words to enhance intercultural and international communication

As our institution expands its international offerings it is increasingly important to be able to communicate with intelligent and able people who have not had much exposure to learning in English. It has been difficult however to communicate verbally due to the low English proficiency of international clients and lack of language skills on the part of the Australian participants. This experience in international communication has highlighted the need for alternative methods of communicating information. In communicating with the students from a Japanese university I found that using diagrams and sketches worked well for example, in creating a cartoon of the process needed to carry out an assignment, such as research in books, asking questions and testing out designs on users. The students also produced visuals to describe their experiences and thinking.

The approach has also been used with postgraduate local students and has developed further dimensions that are proving valuable. This paper explains some of the directions taken in introducing visual communication with international clients and explores the ways the approach accords with research into compensatory communication strategies, in particular, communicating with pictures. The value of visual communication in intercultural and international contexts is demonstrated.

Key words: visual-communication, intercultural, cartoons, compensatory-communication.



Russell Thom 2016

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Stuart Medley is an associate professor in design at ECU. He is the author of the book *The Picture in Design* which seeks to explain the psychology of the communicative potential of the drawn image to art directors and designers. His clients have included the Imperial War Museums UK and Berg's Publishing. He has presented character design workshops in the UK, Europe and Australia and is currently researching cartooning to improve public health. He is also art director and illustrator for Hidden Shoal, a critically acclaimed record label in its tenth year with a roster of international artists.

Introduction

This project derives from a problem that arose whilst attempting to communicate with international students in a course on collaborative design. In 2016 a group of students from a Tokyo based university participated in a study abroad program at Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia. Numbers in this program were high, more than 200 students a year.

Students spent seven weeks studying English followed by seven weeks in academic programs. One of the units in this continuing program is Collaborative Design for an Intercultural Experience. This unit is based on a unit in the Bachelor of Design course that sets out to teach soft skills MacDermott, C., & Ortiz, L. (2017). in design including:

- Design thinking
- Collaborative design
- Working with organisations
- Negotiation
- Wicked problems
- Asking effective questions
- Team working skills
- Design methods

It also introduces aspects of social and environmental sustainability.

Rationale for the research

In trying to communicate to the Japanese students it became clear that many of them had low levels of English comprehension. This unit, because it deals with soft skills, not the more easily defined technical aspects of design, needed to communicate ways of behaving. A simple example of a task in this unit is asking students to find users for a design and ask them questions about it. This seemingly simple task requires that students understand that they need to identify the user of a design, to formulate effective questions and to ask for feedback from the participants. This is a relatively straightforward task when dealing with students with good English competence. Students in this study abroad program are not required to meet Australian university English standards and some have an IELTS as low as 2, compared to the 6.5 required by fully enrolled students. After the first couple of

classes it became clear that drawing diagrams was a more effective way to communicate with these students. This came about by the lecturers' use of simple diagrams to explain what was needed. For example, showing a cartoon figure holding a document marked 'questions', then a picture of a group of participants listening to the questions asked, followed by a picture of the interviewer reading a list of answers.

This observation led to an investigation of the ways in which Japanese visual culture uses illustrations, particularly Manga, to communicate concepts, and also ways in which other cultures use images. While manga embodies a range of aesthetics in its visual styles, compared to other comics cultures in the world its conventions are remarkably homogenous. Cohn (2012) says "In Japan, almost all drawing styles use the conventions found in Japanese comics, which predominantly use a stereotypical style".

Theoretical framework

There is a considerable body of literature on Japanese visual culture that deals with history and use of manga: 'Many readers are probably familiar with the well-known elements of manga. For instance, that manga pages are read from right to left and that human faces are often drawn with large eyes and pointy chins.... these features can point toward many deeper insights into the rich structure of Japanese Visual Language.' (Johnson-Woods 2014 p.188). Johnson-Woods' point about exaggerated features is an important indicator of how to proceed with visualizing. He also discusses the ways in which manga relate to Peirce's formulation of iconic, indexical and symbolic representation (Fabbrichesi, R. and Marietti, S., 2006). Manga images and other diagrammatical uses of people in instructional documents can be considered as iconic, in that they resemble what they portray.

The iconicity of images gives the illusion that all drawings are universal and easy to understand, since they can mimic the character of objects in our daily perception. Despite this, the ways "visual speakers" draw people remain just patterns in the minds of "artists."

Johnson-Woods 2014 p.188

As Cohn observes: “The predominant view says [...] proficiency in drawing relates to the ability to accurately represent the way things look in the world. In contrast, [a] theory of visual language bases drawing proficiency on the degree of “fluency” reached with using an expressive system. Thus, learning to draw must involve acquiring graphic schemas” (p.4, 2012). As far back as 1988, Wilson observed that “nearly all Japanese 6-year-olds can produce complex visual narratives, less than half of 12-year-olds of other countries have this proficiency”. This raised a consideration as to what style to use if developing images designed to communicate actions and processes; did we, the educators, need to use, for example, exaggerated facial cues, such as those sometimes seen in Japanese Manga?

Manga critic and theorist Fusanosuke Natsume (2001) even believes that overemphasis on images detracts from the story. As a language, using a consistent visual vocabulary allows readers the freedom to focus on the content of the expressions rather than on the expressions themselves. (Johnson-Woods 2014 p.190)

What was required was attention to consistency and visual conventions that both educators and visiting students could understand. Iconic pictures better match real-world referents. In this regard these require less learning or agreement regarding meaning than symbolic pictures such as pictograms or ideograms. The problem with iconic or high-fidelity pictures can be their inherent specificity; the beholder will want to try and identify the people in the pictures if the detail in the pictures allows identification. The tasks the students' pictures were put to, however, were rarely about individual persons and more about any Japanese student's experience. Lupton and Miller address the question of specificity implicit in high-fidelity pictures: “the informational richness and depth of the photographic image is at odds with the imperative for the generic” (Design, Writing, Research, 1999, p.133). It was decided that a simple iconic approach, without many of the exaggerated visual cues inherent in Manga, and without unique details in faces or figures where identification was not a task of the pictures, would be relevant to the messages being communicated.

Jamieson (2006) states that perception is paramount in visual communication, unlike written language where codes and conventions are decoded to create meaning.

Whilst both forms of communication provide information they can cross-fertilise each other; words can be used to disambiguate pictures and typically labels in instructional design are used in this way. However, pictures also disambiguate words (Barnard, Johnson & Forsyth, 2003). This led to the decision that the slides used in presentations would use words and images. Findings from research into doctor/patient communication, using images, **discovered** that combinations of words and pictures were effective. Certain picture-text 'interactions' appear to increase comprehension (e.g. 'hard' text with 'easy' pictures) (Moll nd. p.207)

Case study

Because of the low levels of English literacy, communication with these students was largely carried out by use of drawing, especially in cartoon (manga) form. This happened in two ways; students used cartoons to describe their experiences as part of the design processes we used: The five step design process, derived from the work of Osborne and Parnes (Puccio, G. J., Mathers, S. K., Acar, S. K. and Cayirdag, N. K. (2017). The second of the two assessments that they carry out is a 'wicked problem' Brown, V. A., Harris, J. A. and Russell, J. Y. (2010). These problems have no ready solution and in fact cannot be solved, just improved. The problem that they were given is 'How can you use design to improve the experience of being a Japanese student at Edith Cowan University. This problem relates to the First Year Experience issue that all universities have to be aware of in order to stem student attrition.

The second stage in this process is gathering information that relates to the problem. Students were asked to visualize, drawing on to long sheets of paper (3 metres by 900 millimetres), the experience of coming to ECU. The reason for the long rolls was to encourage the generation of images. The Japanese students reported enjoying this process and were very productive.

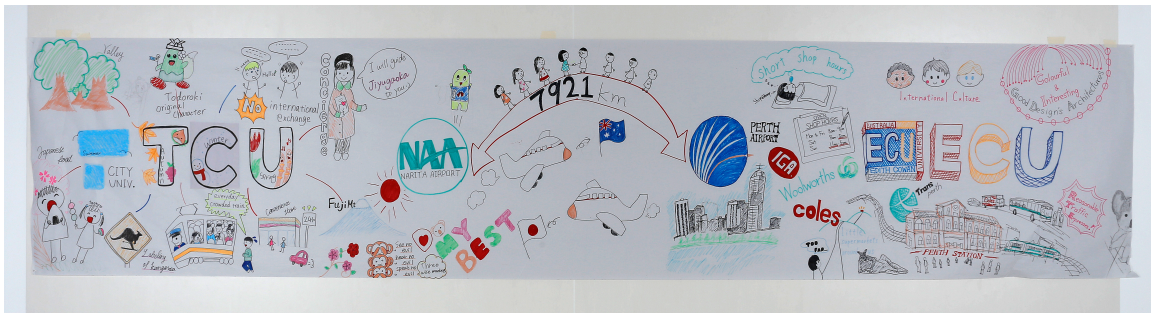


Figure 1 TCU students work

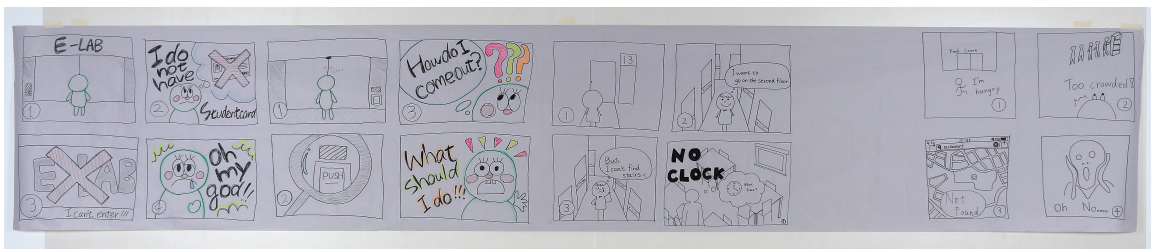


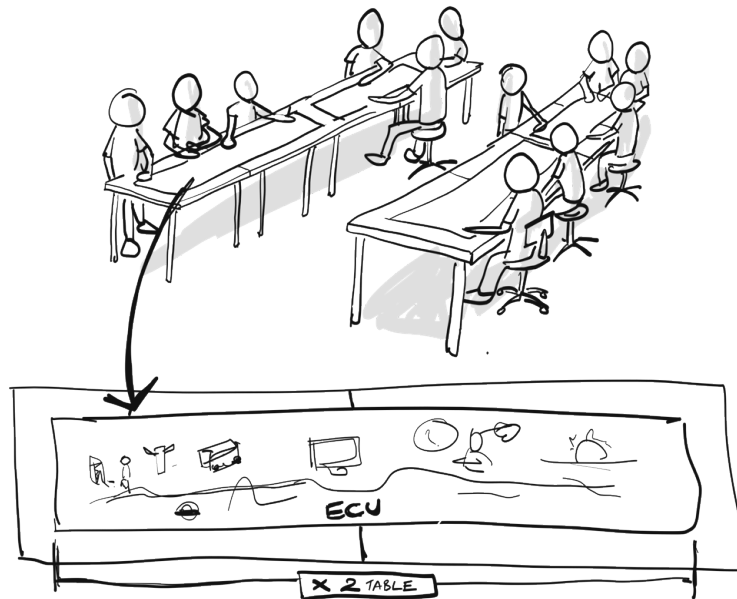
Figure 2 TCU students' work

It seems that giving them a large space to fill encouraged them to produce more responses than if they simply listed problems in writing. This has also been the case when working with local students. A frustration felt by the authors seems quite common in design education; that students tend to respond in words when engaging in brainstorming exercises. The use of images can provide much richer material as it can show how important an issue is. If a student spends a significant amount of time illustrating something, then it's reasonable to deduce that this is important to them. An example of this (not shown here for privacy reasons) is the work of a student that showed dark clouds oppressing a small figure and being hemmed in by a group of ghostly figures. This was clearly a concern and they were referred to relevant university services.

Communicating in pictures

Figure three is an example of a communication to Japanese students. When asked verbally to cut a sheet of paper as long as two studio tables there was some confusion and the action had to be demonstrated visually before students understood what was needed.

- Make two teams on each table
- Take a roll of paper which is two tables long
- draw cartoons (manga) and write notes for the second assignment.



“What is your experience of coming to ECU”

Paper Scroll Designing

Figure 3 Basic instructions to students



Figure 4 A set of instructions showing the process of gaining feedback on a design
Russell Thom 2016

Further work

The visual process was applied to further classwork. Students in the Master of Design course were asked to use the cartooning process to illustrate their use of Grounded Theory (Strauss and Glaser 1973) Grounded theory relies on the emergence of themes from any body of research material. We wondered if using cartooning would prove

productive in establishing themes. Students studied a set of images showing a rural display at an agricultural show and were asked to draw what they saw as issues and themes. This echoes Glaser's adage to 'Trust in Emergence' (op. cit.)

That students were able to easily do this is a demonstration of the usefulness of cartooning beyond the use of icons to communicate. The example shown below in figure 5 is the work of one student in the postgraduate class. It shows the depth of engagement with the visual text and the way that issues can emerge in a visual form. As in conventional grounded theory the emerging themes can then be coded, i.e. given a name, but also a picture. Visually scanning the work so produced more easily allows the researcher to see the connections among the coded information. This form of analysis seems to be relevant to visual texts.



Figure 5 Masters student work, John Bunyan 2016

Conclusion

The use of cartoon images has had a positive effect on communication with Japanese students and feedback from them indicates that the cartoons were appreciated. They made comments in feedback forms stating that cartoons made understanding instructions and unit content much easier. The use of cartoons by the students to

describe their experiences has made some issues easier to describe; for example feelings of alienation were clearly shown with the use of images. A written form would not usually provide as much detail about emotions. The original problem of not being understood has been to some extent solved by the use of cartoons. The redundancy afforded by the combination of words and pictures has proved effective in communicating instructions and unit content.

The use of images has potential across a number of information gathering domains and can be used instead of and in combination with words. The rich visual texts also seemed to encourage engagement by participants.

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