

PN-ABK-077
ISSN 74934
PNABK077

FIELD NOTE

**ART SERVES HEALTH EDUCATION:
TRAINING THE COMMUNICATION TEAM ARTISTS**

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Sponsored by the
Office of Health and Office of Education
Bureau for Science and Technology
United States Agency for International Development
Academy for Educational Development

University of Pennsylvania, Applied Communications Technology, Needham Porter Novelli, and PATH

1988

Artists are often considered individualistic nonconformists, sometimes deservedly so. Creativity and expression often are more important to an artist than formulas or scientific rules. How can artists, practiced in defending their right to break the rules, work constructively as members of the health communication team? And how can we help them to put self-expression aside in favor of making a drawing understandable and appealing to our clients?

These were the challenges implicit in a training assignment for the HEALTHCOM project at the Ministry of Health in Guatemala. Two self-trained artists had joined the communication team, but had not yet become fully productive members. An eight-day training program was arranged in order to help the artists learn more about drawing to communicate messages to a nonliterate audience. Once art instruction was underway, it quickly became clear that the lack of certain skills was not the only impediment to producing better educational materials: the artists needed to improve their working relationships with the other communication team members if they were to be able to use those skills most productively.

THE ARTISTS

The two men who had been hired as artists were trained in areas other than drawing. One worked principally as a photographer. The other had the almost magical ability to fold and cut paper into enchanting designs incorporating animals and birds. Each had received some art instruction, but their training in drawing had been mechanical--almost rigid. They prided themselves in being able to draw from memory. When I asked whether they ever used models, they proudly answered "no." They seemed to think that drawing from models would be cheating and less than creative. Their drawing was somewhat stiff and unimaginative. They were accustomed to working only in pencil or technical pen (rapidograph.) It seemed that they needed encouragement to break out of one way of drawing and permission to use some techniques, such as drawing from models, that might add life to their work.

Their supervisors had requested that they receive training in basic drawing skills and in using new materials and techniques. They were frustrated that the artists did not offer imaginative solutions to the problem of presenting messages in a visual form for an illiterate audience. The managers complained that the artists worked painstakingly

slowly to produce an initial sketch and then considered it a "work of art" and resisted making needed revisions.

As the person who would be in charge of the training, I began by trying to understand the artists' own perspectives on the situation, and to win their trust. I talked with them about their work situation. No one, they said, wanted their opinions on how to illustrate the materials. They were isolated in the Ministry of Health offices, and rarely participated in the field visits which were so important to the development of appropriate health messages. Without any prior involvement or real understanding of why decisions had been made about how to present the material visually, the artists were expected to draw to their team members' specifications. The artists felt that many of the revisions they were asked to make were whimsical, motivated by a desire to exercise control over the artwork. And they made the classical complaint of artists everywhere: no one understood the time that it takes to produce artwork. I asked whether they had tried to talk with their teammates about these issues. They had not.

Clearly, the communicators needed to communicate with each other.

THE TRAINING PLAN

Based on these discussions and my observation of their work, I developed a plan for the eight days of training. I wanted them to spend most of their time drawing, and planned to incorporate a few simple techniques and new materials into the drawing sessions. Another area of training was to be about visual perception and the special requirements of an illiterate audience. And finally, I needed to develop some ways to begin talking with the artists about their role as members of a health communication team.

Each day should hold a variety of activities, alternating thoughtful discussion with the introduction of new skills and lots of time to practice those. The following schedule for each day allowed me to cover all of the material described in more detail the sections below:

| | |
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| Introduce a new drawing technique | 1/2 hour |
| Practice drawing | 2 hours |
| Discuss visual perception of nonliterate | 1 hour |

| | |
|--|----------|
| Learn new art material or technique | 1 hour |
| Explore artist's role as team member | 1/2 hour |
| Practice drawing, using new techniques | 2 hours |

My background as an art teacher gave me added credibility for this job, but an understanding of the special needs of nonliterate audiences, and the requirements of a public health communication program, further helped me in guiding both the techniques and the working styles of these professionals. The following descriptions of training activities are meant to provide ideas on how to replicate such a training. Several books are recommended for more detail.

DRAWING AND NEW MATERIALS

Several activities helped the artists to:

- observe more carefully the figures they would draw
- work large
- draw more loosely, less stiffly
- draw important details accurately
- create realism instead of stereotyped visual symbols

While plenty of training time was spent improving artistic capabilities, it was always made clear that the specific reason for building these skills was to be able to develop more effective health education visuals.

Before drawing at all, we talked about drawing "from the right side of the brain." This concept, described in great detail in the book Drawing from the Right Side of the Brain, helps an artist to draw from direct observation, creating more realistic and lively work. According to this approach, most of us learn from a very early age to draw symbols to represent things we know. We know that a person has a hand at the end of his or her arm, we name it "hand," and we produce a five-fingered symbol. This tendency to name and to plug in symbols is a function of the more logical left side of the brain. It can lead to drawing according to certain accepted stereotypes which are recognizable to many of us in a given culture, but which may mean little to nonliterates. A series of activities described in the book freed the artists to skip the naming process and to draw directly what they observed. Their drawings became less stereotypical and richer--and

more useful to the educator because they are closer to the way a nonliterate person might observe the world.

These exercises and discussion made the artists more receptive to drawing from models. We spent most of the drawing time for the first three days on **gesture** and **contour** drawings, working directly from models. Both drawing techniques and how to teach them are described in The Natural Way to Draw. On large sheets of newsprint with thick felt-tip markers or wax crayons, the artists produced a series of 60-second gesture drawings, completing 15 or 20 gesture drawings each day. They became comfortable with working from a model, learned to observe the entire model right away, to draw quickly, and to work large. Several sessions of contour drawing, a slow and deliberate exercise which requires the artist to slow down his or her eye motion, led them to observe what was really in front of them, rather than to substitute learned symbols. Both contour and gesture drawings led the artists to rely less on shortcuts or formulas and to increase their observation skills.

They continued these drawing exercises each day, but by the third day also began applying their new skills to the practical work of illustrating educational materials. Their supervisors had pointed out that a lot of time was lost as the artists painstakingly completed finished drawings each time they were given an assignment. It would be more efficient to make a series of quick sketches from which the most appropriate could be worked up into a final drawing. Changes could be made before much time had been invested. If these initial sketches were produced with non-photo-reproducing pencil, the artists could then work up the final drawings in ink directly over the sketches. The light blue "non-repro" pencil lines would not be picked up in photocopying or reproducing the drawings for printing.

They practiced using the pencils. I modeled actions such as pouring an envelope of oral rehydration salts into a bottle, using the envelope and bottle as props. They each spent five minutes on a quick sketch, using a non-repro pencil and filling a piece of 9 by 12 inch paper. They were instructed not to erase any lines and to redraw sections as needed. Then, still observing the model, they switched to fine markers and made finished drawings directly over the blue sketches. We sent the drawings out to have reduced photocopies made so that they could see that only the ink lines copied and that their larger drawings reduced well. This technique allowed them to:

- work in a larger format than the finished drawing size
- draw quickly

- draw with much more freedom, since they could change any line without much fuss
- practice working from a live model

They modeled for each other and we enlisted the caretaker's children to model. They practiced drawing the entire figure and drawing details such as only the hands and the bottle.

We discussed how this approach of quick sketches could allow the artists to become more involved in the creative aspects of materials development. They could produce a quick series of sketches to demonstrate a variety of visual representations of a single idea. The rest of the communication team could then select the design that suited their needs. Revisions of the final inked-in drawing would be unnecessary, saving time and making the artists less resistant to revision of their "works of art."

Throughout the training, the artists were introduced to a variety of new drawing materials such as soft drawing pencils, grease pencils, markers, and "brush-tip" markers. These were appreciated by the artists and helped them to work more freely.

By the time we mounted their art show at the end of the training, the artists had produced dozens of drawings. They felt quite comfortable working quickly, working large, drawing from models, and using several new techniques and materials. They demonstrated to their coworkers that through quick sketches they could contribute to the creative process by "visualizing" a concept or message. And they felt more comfortable about producing rough sketches as needed, rather than always developing finished drawings.

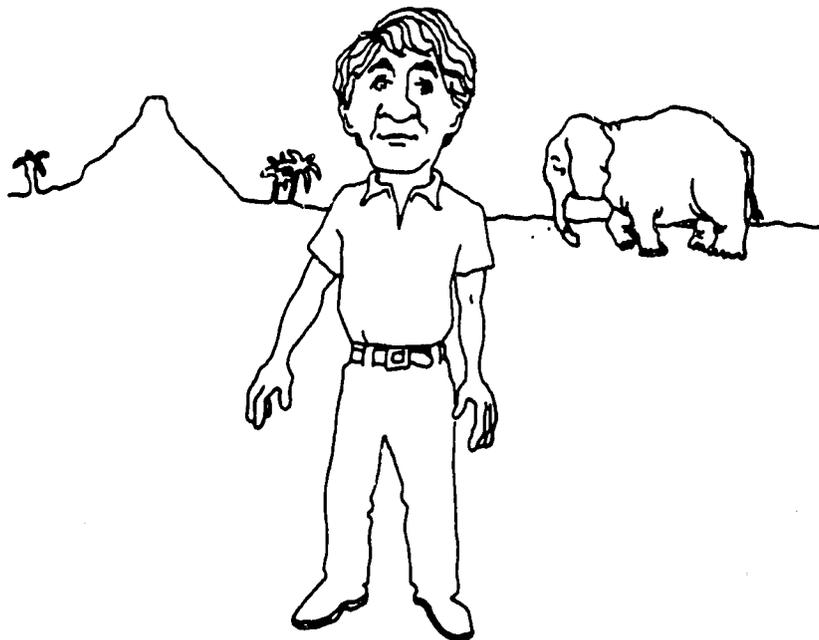
VISUAL PERCEPTION OF NONLITERATES

Producing visuals for a nonliterate audience requires special understanding of how nonliterates "read" drawings. Drawings must be clear, uncomplicated, and free of some of the conventional symbols understood by literates. While many examples exist of local symbols which are understood by nonreaders, there are no rules about what will transmit a message to a particular audience. My purpose in talking about perception to these artists was to point up the absolute need to pretest visuals with the intended local audience. No matter how skilled the artists, the bottom line is that only the target audience can judge whether a particular drawing works or doesn't work.

We spent approximately an hour each day discussing a different aspect of visual communication. Several examples from studies on "visual literacy" (principally taken from Print Materials for Nonreaders and Communicating with Pictures) were used. Many anecdotes from the experience of health educators at PATH/PIACT, a group which has pioneered the use of visual materials with nonreaders, enlivened the discussion. Again and again, I stressed that while these examples could be instructive, each cultural setting and each type of visual material would pose new problems. There are no formulas for producing visuals which can be understood by nonliterate--then only rule is pretest and revision, pretest and revision.

We began discussion by exploring the concept of perspective. I asked the artists to draw a human being in the foreground and an elephant in the background of the same drawing. Their drawings looked something like this:

FIGURE 1:



I asked them why the person was larger than the elephant and why the elephant was floating above the human. We then discussed this "Western" idea of perspective, in which the illustrator and the "reader" agree that objects in the foreground will be drawn larger and lower down on the paper. This is a convention which each of us who is "visually literate" has learned to understand, but is not necessarily understood in the same way by people who are unschooled.

It was useful to point out that artificial conventions allow us to represent three dimensional scenes on the two dimensions of a sheet of drawing paper. The artists began to recognize that they had learned these conventions through lifelong exposure to photographs, drawings, films, and television. Communicating messages to nonliterate through drawings is simpler if the drawings contain fewer of these artificial conventions.

Guatemala's indigenous population carries on an aesthetic tradition that is among the world's richest. Color, design, shape, and symbolism are a part of villagers' daily lives. In addition to their own rich artistic heritage, villagers in most parts of the country are exposed to at least some photographs, drawings, print advertising, and even films and television. Thus, many of the difficulties in visual communication confronted in less visually-oriented cultures are not a problem even among nonliterate in Guatemala. We talked about how this might make the artists' task simpler than in many cultures.

The artists soon understood that the only way to be certain that a drawing is communicating the message they want to communicate is to ask the target audience what they see. If the pretests indicate that the message is misunderstood, the best way to develop a new visual means of representing the idea is to ask the villagers how they would depict the message.

THE ARTISTS' ROLE ON THE COMMUNICATION TEAM

The communication team artists were frustrated by their limited role in developing the materials for the project. Their supervisors and coworkers were likewise frustrated that the artists worked slowly and contributed little in the way of creative ideas. A good part of our discussion was about how this situation might be improved.

A part of the frustration is built in. The term for this type of employee in Spanish is dibujante, or "drawer," not "artist." Team members were accustomed to making assignments which the artists would then carry out. This type of working relationship is very common in such projects, and special efforts must be made to incorporate the artists into the creative process of educational materials development.

I talked with the artists' supervisors about steps that they could take to involve the artists more, such as to:

- make sure the artists get field experience
- train the artists to conduct pretests
- include the artists in discussions of messages
- provide opportunities to work from models
- encourage them to submit roughs when a finished drawing is not required
- involve the artists in analyzing pretest results.

The artists were encouraged to take the following steps:

- take the early message concepts and sketch alternative visual presentations
- be ready on pretest visits to draw alternative visuals
- expect to make revisions until the idea is communicated.

Both sides were encouraged to communicate better about their needs and abilities. All agreed that the training in itself would add to the artists' credibility as full communication team members. The artists finished the training more confident in their art skills and more willing to contribute to the entire creative process of materials development.

Recommended resources:

Fussell, Diana et. al. Communicating with Pictures. Kathmandu, Nepal: United Nations Children's Fund, 1975.

Edwards, Betty. Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain. Los Angeles, Calif.: Tarcher, Inc. 1979.

Nicolaides, Kimon. The Natural Way to Draw. Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1941.

Zimmerman, Margot, and Gordon W. Perkin. Print Materials for Nonreaders: Experiences in Family Planning and Health. Seattle, Wash.: PIACT. 1982.