

SECTION 4

Understanding Symbolic Pictorial Presentations (e.g. Posters)

36. For various practical reasons it is difficult to conduct controlled researches into the effects of posters and other symbolic pictorial representations on non-captive audiences such as farmers. Yet posters composed of visual symbols are widely used to communicate with non-literate adults in many parts of the Commonwealth. The difficulties were made explicit in the evaluation of the cocoa campaign carried out in Ghana in 1954 and 1955 reported in a mimeographed document presented by M.L. Clarkson to the Ghana Social Welfare Department in 1956. "Illiterate people are unwilling to be troubled by a series of questions of which they do not see the point and the replies they give are unreliable; anything to please the questioner or get rid of him. At the same time we needed some guidance as to which kind of poster, picture or slogan was most effective and which did not convey any meaning or make any appeal". Exactly.

37. The team investigating ways of finding out about aesthetic perception in North East Thailand came to a similar conclusion, finding that villagers had short attention spans in formal testing and interview situations and had little free time available. During planting and harvesting the entire village was engaged in agricultural pursuits in the day time and at night the illumination was poor. During the slacker periods in agriculture, festivals and social activities filled the days and proved distracting to any concentrated testing or individual viewing.

38. For these and other reasons, there is a paucity of published material on the effects of symbolic visual presentations on people of a low level of literacy. Yet some research has been conducted, notably in Southern and East Africa.

39. Of some interest is the report emerging from the work of W. Hudson and H. Hector who investigated the usefulness of safety posters designed for Bantu industrial workers by the National Occupational Safety Association in Johannesburg, Republic of South Africa. In the abstract of the report published by Wendy Winter, it is concluded that human behaviour should be depicted in accordance with Bantu tradition and that superimpositions intending to represent depth or movement are unsuccessful because conventional depth cues cause confusion. Hudson and Hector also found that symbolic meanings were often attached to colours and shapes, which frequently distorted the intended meaning.

40. Fonseca and Kearl, working in rural Brazil, reported that people of limited education tended to give the most literal interpretation to any symbols that have both a literal and figurative meaning. Holmes inspired by the Brazil findings, studied the responses of urban youths and women in Kenya. He found, as noted earlier, that they were confused by too much detail, yet needed realistic portrayal to get meaning from a health poster. More significantly, pictorial symbols were interpreted literally. A further example of this phenomenon is reported in Advance October 1961 in an article by the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development in Ghana (page 58). Posters intended to encourage all the physically handicapped to register, resulted in only men appearing since the poster had not shown any women.

41. Many examples of such literal interpretations of pictorial representations which have symbolic meaning, are quoted by workers from all countries. Posters are seldom designed by indigenous artists and, even when they are, most of the artists have been trained to adopt an exotic style of drawing and to apply symbolic forms not recognized by the indigene. Furthermore, posters are designed to be shown to the general public, without differentiating between levels of acculturation, or urbanization. What is pictorially meaningful at one level of acculturation may be meaningless at another. The meaning of a picture or poster is always related to the viewer's own pre-occupations, interests and experience. Before designing any mass communication tool, there should be research into the local traditional and social symbolism especially when the message is not accompanied by a verbal face-to-face explanation. Messages are sent through media and visual media which do not use words at all are better avoided. "A-V materials are most effectively used as aids to words with illiterates; the spoken word is to this extent essential", is the considered judgment of Evelyn Wood who for many years has studied the effects of different audio visual media with illiterate people of India (Taken from a mimeographed paper distributed from 5 Sobani Road, Cuffe Parade, Bombay 5 in March 1960) Hudson and Hector, too, found that when the safety posters were explained with oral instructions, understanding increased by 50 per cent.

42. There are few controlled researches on how posters or large pictures are perceived by illiterate adults. The work of Hudson and Hector in South Africa (1963) of Fuglesang in Zambia (1969) and that of Holmes in Kenya, echoing that of Fonseca and Kearl in Brazil are the sum of those we can refer to. Other observations do however exist, based on field experience of campaign workers, which in their cumulative effect provide valuable guide lines to production. For example the 1954 - 1955 campaign, carried out in Ghana to persuade cocoa farmers to deal with the plague of swollen shoot, included the use of posters. The effect of eight of these was evaluated among three groups of farmers and the general conclusion was that posters should be treated as teaching aids. They made little impact when stuck up by themselves although villagers often liked to have them for various other reasons.

43. Some further guide lines emerge from the field testing of pictorial materials for new literates, as reported in Communication through Educational Materials edited by Seth Spaulding in 1955 for the Burma Translation Society, and the Unesco Group Training Scheme for Fundamental Education in An experiment in teaching adults to read and write. Both of these are summarized in Literacy Primers: construction, evaluation and use by K. Neijs published by Unesco in the series of Manuals on Adult and Youth Education No.2. (Yelwal, Mysore, India 1955). Seth Spaulding and John Bowers conducted a Unesco workshop on preparing material for new literates in Kenya in 1962 in the course of which some illustrations were field tested. The work is reported in Manuals on Adult and Youth Education No.3, Simple reading material for adults: its preparation and use published by Unesco in 1963.

44. It seems that few general conclusions can be drawn with regard to the use of pictorial symbolism for communicating new ideas, largely because of the grave methodological deficiencies in the studies thus far reported. It can safely be said however, that great social sensitivity and deep knowledge of the symbolic system of the community are essential pre-requisites for artists who design posters, if they are to communicate effectively with non-literate people.