

STUDENTS' APPROACHES TO POSTER MAKING

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This paper describes innovative assessment practices in a first-year course in employment relations that includes a poster assessment item. Starting from the premise that the term 'text' is more than just print material and includes various forms of visual communication, this paper argues that teaching and learning methods need to incorporate visual forms of communication and assessment. The paper describes the role of student posters as a means of communicating to a wider audience the conclusions of a workplace-based project. In particular, it describes and analyses five basic approaches students used to create their posters. Drawing from the communication literature on the role of pictures in the processing of print texts, film theory, and the teaching and learning literature, the paper analyses the usefulness of the various approaches taken by students. The outcomes of the project are a better knowledge of how students conceptualise the task and create their posters. This will assist tertiary teachers who use poster assessment to understand the dynamics of the task and to guide students in creating richer and more meaningful posters.

Introduction

Written reports, essays and (to a lesser extent) oral presentations are the most popular types of coursework assignment at undergraduate level. However, posters are an assessment option used in a variety of disciplines. Increasingly we live in an age of pervasive visual imagery, with most people in industrial societies spending much of their time in front of television screens, Web graphics, print illustrations and other types of visual displays (Messaris, 2001a). There are therefore

arguments that we need a more visually oriented educational system that focuses on ‘visual literacy’ as well as the more common forms of oral and print literacy (Messaris, 2001a, 2001b). Posters are a method of introducing students to the concept of visual literacy. In addition, posters may provide a way of tapping into the needs and interests of students with diverse learning styles.

This article describes the role of student posters as a means of communicating to a wider audience the conclusions of a workplace-based written project in Employment Relations. In particular, it describes and analyses five basic approaches students used to create their posters. Drawing from the communication literature on the role of pictures in the processing of print texts, film theory, and the teaching and learning literature, the paper analyses the usefulness of the various approaches taken by students. The five approaches can be communicated to students as possible ‘models’ for poster production, thus giving them some basic tools in visual literacy and visual communication.

The paper proceeds in four sections. The first discusses visual modes of representation, including visual communication in higher education assessment. The second part describes the study. In the third section, we develop and apply a typology to the posters produced by students. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for other teachers using posters as part of an assessment regime.

Visual Assessment Items in Higher Education

Primary, secondary and tertiary education systems of instruction and assessment have been overwhelmingly dominated by ‘a hegemonic print discourse’ (Russell, 2000: 205). The visual realm has been viewed as a ‘less legitimate form of reasoned communication than print, and more a medium for entertainment than for the serious message’ (Healy, 2000: 161, 162). However, widely diffused new technologies and media, particularly the Internet, increasingly employ visual and print text in an integrated way, and thus the hegemony of print has been criticised (Thesen, 2001: 133). Young people in particular have been born into an aggressively visual culture (George, 2002); 70 per cent of Australian children aged 7 or 8, for instance, play computer games at least once a week (AIFS, 2008). ‘Text’ is now defined much more widely to refer to ‘multiple forms of communication including information on a digital screen, video, film and other media, oral speech, television, and works of art as well as print material’ (Healy, 2000: 156), and high school English

courses often use non print-based texts as examples of communication. A new generation of students, 'Digital Natives', is said to exist (Prensky, 2001) who are fundamentally different from their predecessors, creating a need for educators to adjust their pedagogical strategies to suit this new kind of 'Net Gen' learner, although other researchers find the extent of this so-called phenomenon exaggerated (Kennedy, Judd, Churchward and Gray, 2008). However, there is no doubt that 'Net Gen' students are subject to a greater number and diversity of visual images; how they absorb, make sense of and perhaps critique these images is another question.

Multi-literacies

In response to the increasing diversity and integration of modes of communication, the term 'multi-literacies' has been coined to denote the process of making meaning through the interaction of various communicative modes (Duncum, 2004:253; Cope and Kalantzis, 2000:5). Tertiary lecturers are increasingly under pressure to deliver multi-modal forms of instruction, including visually-based technologies (Barnes and Tynan, 2007).

The process of becoming multi-literate is complex, as the visual and the verbal realms employ different sign systems. Written texts are descriptive representations using symbols, which are arbitrary designations that are associated with objects by convention. Visual texts, on the other hand, are depictive representations using iconic signs. Icons are associated with the designated object by similarity (Schnotz, 2002: 103-111). The consequences of the differences in sign system between visual and written text have implications for how human beings process complex texts. Analysis of academic written text entails sequential and logical reasoning, a sense of order and purpose, and ability to detect abuses of logic and commonsense, capacity for judging the efficacy of relations between propositions and the sense of objectivity and detachment (Karl, 1994: 195-197). Images, however, are uniquely sensual (Duncum, 2004: 257), often evoking strong emotional responses and a sense of immediacy which interfere with the viewer's linear and rational detachment (Thesen, 2001: 138). Skills of visual analysis can best be taught by means of hands-on learning, rather than second-hand instruction, in order to create more discerning consumers of visual meaning and visual culture (Messaris, 2001a). One of these methods is via making one's own poster.

Posters as Visually-based Assessment

Posters as a form of visually-based assessment have long been used in a variety of disciplines. Examples include the presentation of case material by social work students (Akister and Kim, 1998; Akister, Bannon and Mullender-Lock, 2000); the development of 'rich pictures' of a systems environment for business information technology (Elliott and Starkings, 1998); for primary mathematics education students (Zevenbergen, 1999, 2001); for psychology students (Gore and Camp, 1987; Baird, 1991); in an undergraduate ecology course (Billington, 1997); for geography students (Vujakovic, 1995; Whalley and Rea, 1998); for chemistry education for health profession undergraduates (Dunstan and Bassinger, 1997); and to develop research skills in nursing (Moule, Judd and Girot, 1998). While hard-copy 'wall hanging' posters are the most common version, electronic posters are also gaining in popularity, with advantages of low cost, easy storage, and accessibility (Whalley and Rea 1998).

Posters have a range of functions as assessment items. By discouraging verbal information, they encourage clear and concise thinking in communication (Berry and Nyman, 1998; Zevenbergen, 1999); they provide opportunities for structured and informal interaction to build knowledge and skills and examine values and attitudes (Rush, Merritt-Gray and Noel, 1995); they can be used to develop learning through peer tutoring and peer, self and tutor assessment. One of the key features of posters is that, like oral presentations, they are 'on display' mechanisms of sharing learning in a social setting enhancing interactivity (Hounsell, 2003). When used in conjunction with a written report, posters can present information and conclusions succinctly and can allow discussion and questioning with the authors (Berry and Nyman, 1998), thus creating dialogue between learners and teachers (Miracle and King, 1994; Everitt and Hardiker, 1996) and between communities of learners. As Gibbs (1992) has pointed out, this has similarities with poster sessions at academic conferences. In a broader, more diffused sense posters can develop general communication skills that are relevant to the creation of reflexive practitioners (Akister and Kim, 1998).

Overall, the merit of posters is that they provide a distinctly different mode of assessment that taps into students' different learning styles. Posters, particularly used in a group setting, can enable students with different learning styles to work on the same item, but in different ways: students with more active (doing) learning styles may take up the pen and sketch ideas that are being fed to them by those with more abstract (thinking) and reflective (watching) learning styles. Posters can also

provide a variation in activity, a break from print-focused work, which adds to students' interest in their learning (Berry and Houston, 1995: 23).

The literature also reveals some disadvantages or challenges in poster-making. They can rely on visual appeal rather than content to attract viewers (Duchin and Sherwood, 1990; Zevenbergen, 2001). Students may spend too much time merely on getting their posters to 'look pretty' (Berry and Houston, 1995: 24). Devising (and consistently applying) marking criteria can challenge lecturers and tutors.

Visual Literacy and the Poster

The literature on posters presents various arguments for the use of posters, and useful tips about how to integrate posters within the overall assessment framework, and how to mark them and provide feedback. However, the discussion is rarely grounded in the literature on visual literacy and visual communication. It does not explain the various approaches students may take to poster-making. In contrast, providing examples of various genres of academic writing (reports, essays, case studies and so forth) within a particular discipline is increasingly common, often with 'fail', 'pass' 'credit' and 'distinction' examples being provided. Providing examples of writing genres assists students in apprehending the structure of knowledge, as meaning is given through structure (Laurillard, 1993: 50). Similarly, where visual assessment methods are used, it is useful to give students examples of posters to be discussed in class. However, to do this effectively, a clear, simple means of categorising poster types is required in order to give lecturers and students a common language to discuss poster composition and effectiveness.

Background and Method

The data gathered for this paper was drawn from a visual learning assessment item in a large first year course, Employment Relations, taught to a wide range of business students at Griffith University, Brisbane Australia. The course provides a multidisciplinary introduction to the nature of management-employee relations at work from sociological, legal, economic, political and management perspectives. As part of their assessment, student groups were required to produce a poster – or some other type of visual display – based on their findings from a group-work written report they had produced about an employment issue such as health and safety, training, performance management, or recruitment and selection. The report had to be based on findings from either number of interviews with employees, or with a

manager in an organisation. The poster was produced one week after the groups submitted their written reports and before they received the mark and feedback for the report from their tutor. The written report was worth 40% of the overall mark, and the poster 10%. In earlier iterations, a large venue was used for poster display, with all 400 students simultaneously displaying their posters for viewing by their peers and marking by their tutor. However, the latter option proved logistically difficult to organise. In 2004, all students displayed their work within their small tutorial classes, and were assessed by their tutors.

To help their tutors and other students understand the meaning of their poster, student were asked to write a short explanation about the poster. The written explanation entailed the following:

1. the main conclusion from the report;
2. the central message, narrative or story of the visual image;
3. the audience for the poster;
4. the context in which the poster was to be viewed;
5. the style or genre of visual image; and
6. the meaning of the main images/figures.

The purpose of the poster explanation was partly to stimulate student thinking about poster design and partly to reinforce that it was expected that the message of the poster, based on the written report, was to be well thought through and clearly expressed. Students were given advice based on the work of visual sociologists Emmison and Smith (2000), who developed a framework for analysing visual materials. This included basic advice on the main design elements: lettering, composition, and use of lines, space and colour.

The main learning objective of the poster was to develop students' ability to show key concepts and argument visually (George, 2002). Secondary objectives were to cater for different learning styles and provide an interactive, social mechanism to 'display' students' learnings. It was expected that there would be a strong connection between the conclusion of the students' written report and central message of the poster. Students were advised that it was simply not good enough to produce a pretty poster with lots of jumbled images on it. Students were, in effect, being asked to develop a visual argument, with the poster used to make a reasoned claim to persuade the audience of the validity of the conclusions (George, 2002: 29). Posters were assessed in terms of clarity of message, visual impact and creativity. Tutoring staff noted that

moving from simple oral expository presentations in the tutorials, to asking the students to use of a poster to explain key findings and overall conclusions, made the presentations more animated, helped students focus on clear themes and main conclusions, and made listening and responding to a range of presentations more enjoyable and engaging for students. In short, tutors all reported that the posters markedly assisted with the process of students conveying their findings and ensuring greater engagement across the tutorial group. Students could simply have been asked to provide a written abstract to summarise their findings, but the poster fulfilled other aims, fostering high interactivity in groups when posters were created and again in the larger tutorial groups where posters were displayed and explained.

Reported here are the results of an examination of more than one hundred posters to categorise, if possible, the approaches taken by the students to communicating understanding through visual display. (As a separate component [not reported here] we interviewed students about their responses the poster assessment item.) This project adopted a modified phenomenographic approach. Following Marton and Saljo (1997) the posters were analysed, then grouped together on the basis of similarity. Posters were thus organised into particular categories or 'pools of meaning' (Marton and Saljo, 1997: 42).

Students' Approaches to the Posters

The starting point for our categorisation was existing frameworks that analyse visual processing. One such example is Levin's five-fold framework that categorises the role of pictures in text processing: decorative, representational, organisational, interpretational and transformational (cited in Carney and Levin, 2002). While this framework was useful – and we did draw on some aspects of it – the Levin framework was too narrow, as it was devised to represent the ways in which pictures were used to complement text as an aid to learning to read, which is a very different to our students' aim, which was making their own visuals to succinctly convey meaning. Also useful is the framework developed by film theorists Bordwell and Thompson (2004) of different film types: narrative, rhetorical, abstract, categorical and associational. We drew on these two very different traditions to help us devise categories that we felt captured the range of approaches students adopted to poster making. We then tried to link our framework SOLO taxonomy of levels of learning, originating from Biggs and Collis (1982) and further developed by Biggs (see for example Biggs 1999). SOLO stands for 'Structure of Observed Learning Outcome'. It can be used to

characterise student responses to assessment items, and provides a systematic way of describing how a learner’s performance grows in complexity when mastering many tasks. It has five levels. Students at the pre-structural level show no organisation of disparate pieces of information, and the assessment item fails to ‘make sense’. Students at the unistructural level make only simple and obvious connections between facts and ideas, and do not show the significance of the connections. At a multistructural level, students make a variety of connections, but again do not show the significance of the relationship between connections. At a relational level, students demonstrate the relationship between connections, and can identify for the relationship between the connections and the whole. At the most sophisticated level, the extended abstract, students make connections beyond the immediate subject area, and can generalise and transfer the principles from the specific to the abstract.

Once we had devised the schema, we asked two colleagues to apply the categories to 25 posters. Our categories made sense to them and they were able to consistently and reliably classify posters according to our schema. On the basis of our analysis we identified five main approaches: abstract, text-based, declarative, categorical and metaphorical (Figure 1). These approaches roughly correspond to the ascending categories of Biggs’s levels of learning, with ‘abstract’ the simplest and ‘metaphorical’ the most complex.

Figure 1 Students’ Approaches to Poster-Making

APPROACH	MAIN FEATURES
Abstract	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Random distribution of elements • No obvious relationship between elements • Visual impact, but message not clear
Text-based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Composed principally of text • May be some decorative elements; not central to message • Low visual impact • Message often clear, but only (or principally) conveyed by text

Students' Approaches to Poster Making

Declarative		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple message of a few words, reinforced by single visual image • Highly normative • Does not specify relationships between key variables
Categorical	<i>Diagrammatic</i> <i>Comic Book</i> <i>Dualist</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construction of a 'narrative' • 'Comic book' best at constructing narrative, but requiring more skills from students • Dualist approach may be normative, but conveys more complexity than declarative approach • Relationships often (not always) shown between key variables
Metaphorical		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of a visual metaphor as central organising concept (e.g. bridge, road, staircase, jigsaw, menu) • May include other (subsidiary) visuals • Relationships shown between key variables

Abstract Approach

In this approach, images, words and phrases were randomly dispersed across the poster with no apparent pattern or structure. It was unclear how the floating signs related to one another. An example of this type of approach can be seen in Figure 2. The intention may have been to create a gestalt impression, but it is difficult to interpret the key message. Very few students adopted this approach and, where they did, these posters were graded very poorly. The approach is similar to the pre-structural category of Biggs's (1999: 46-48) SOLO taxonomy in that the posters indicated shallow (or no) learning and did not convey an 'argument' to the viewer, thus not fulfilling the basic criterion of encapsulating the main message of the written report.

Figure 2 – Abstract Approach



Figure 3 – Text Approach

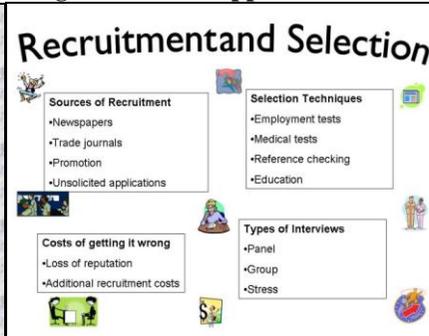


Figure 4 – Declarative Approach (Diagrammatic)



Figure 5 – Categorical Approach

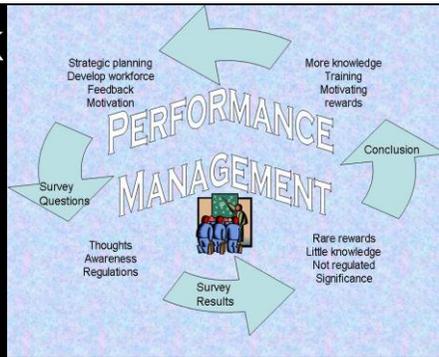


Figure 6 – Categorical Approach

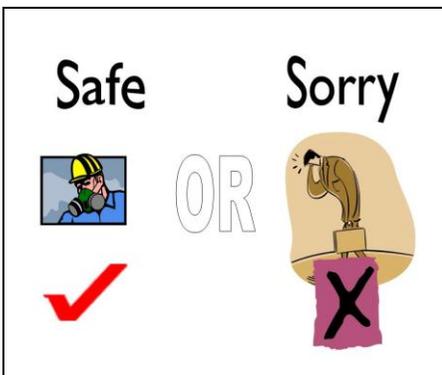


Figure 7 – Metaphorical Approach



Text-based Approach

Some posters were composed almost entirely of text, often drawn directly from the written report. The text would be bracketed into a number of discrete chunks or sections. These sections would normally mirror and summarise the main sections of the written report. Often the

students would type the text on their computers and then paste the printed text onto a sheet of cardboard, to be read as normal text from left to right and top to bottom. The posters may have contained minimal decoration such as borders around the textboxes or the edges of the poster. The posters would be titled with the main report topic, with sub-headings commonly being used to identify the content of the main textboxes.

Alternatively, rather than using large pieces of texts, some students summarised the main points into key phrases or paragraphs. Sometimes charts or tables were added to display the statistical findings of the research, often without any elaboration. Commonly these chunks of information would be loosely arranged on the poster, often without any apparent links between the different pieces of information.

A subset of text-based posters was 'text based with decorative or representational visuals'. These included some visual material to supplement the written text. An example of this approach is shown in Figure 3. These posters were still largely text-based but included some additional visual material that was either decorative or representational. The decorative material may have included some small images of the topic dotted over the poster or around the edges and perhaps some other features such fancy borders, extensive colouring, hand-drawn headings and the like. The visual material beautified the posters but was largely ornamental and added little to the overall message of the poster.

Some students in this category of work were more thoughtful about their choice of visual material and were able select images that represented or illustrated their topic rather than being just decorative. For example, students may have produced a poster dealing with the importance of equity at work and illustrated this topic by using images of people of different ethnic groups to represent diversity at work.

This approach to poster construction involved a low level of abstraction and relied heavily on written text to impart meaning. These posters were generally not graded highly as they showed little effort and had low visual impact. It is difficult to classify these posters according to Biggs's SOLO framework. This poster approach was pre-structural to the extent that little visual material was used in the posters and hence students did not really engage with the assessment task. However, the predominant use of text enabled students to clearly convey their findings in summary form.

Declarative Approach

Some students used the poster to make a simple, direct rhetorical or declarative statement or list. This approach included making exhortations such as ‘health and safety is important’ or ‘training is vital to success’. These posters were often simply constructed and communicated a direct and succinct message. Figure 4 gives an example. The viewer was required to do little ‘decoding’ of the poster. In some cases the main message was displayed in written text with images used to represent the main idea. In other cases, students used a strong visual image to depict the main idea and then use some text to clarify meaning. Sometimes these posters would contain several distinct statements on a single topic.

While these posters were very direct, they consisted of statements rather than stories. Declarative statements or simple lists signify simplistic and superficial thinking as the information is often too generic to be meaningful and critical relationships are left unspecified (Tufte, 2003: 5). Thus, while this approach was an effective method of communicating a simple message, there was a lack of sophistication of the message, and the posters did not reflect the conclusions of the report in any kind of depth. This approach was similar to Biggs’ (1999) unistructural category in so far as students identified a single issue or concept of importance without really exploring the relationship between ideas.

Categorical Approach

Some students organised their ideas and concepts into categories. In a slightly different context, this approach has been described as ‘organisational’ by Carney and Levin (2002) and ‘compartmental’ by Tufte (1997). Visual material and text would be grouped in some manner, to signify the central ideas and how they were linked together. In most cases, text was used sparingly.

This organisational approach was used by many groups of students. Students used this categorical approach in three different ways: diagrammatic, comic book and dualism. A commonality between these methods was that they all attempted to construct a narrative. As Czarniawska (1998: 3, 9) notes, narratives are the main mode of human knowledge and communication. Narratives are a mode of being and thinking: a fundamental human activity (Soderberg, 2003: 8). A narrative comprises three elements: ‘an original state of affairs, an action or event, and the consequent state of affairs’ (Czarniawska, 1998: 2).

These elements make sense when a narrative comprises a plot. The three categorical approaches are summarised below.

- ***Diagrammatic organisation.*** A sub-type of the categorical approach was the use of diagrams. Key words/phrases, symbols and images were grouped and related to impart meanings within a conventional narrative structure. With this type of poster, the students were seeking to communicate by using the familiar structure of written text where nouns signify key ideas and verbs indicate the relationship between ideas. As can be seen in Figure 5, pictures (or text boxes) were used as nouns to represent key ideas and arrows (or the like) were used as verbs to indicate direction of causation or influence and temporality. Some diagrams were simply arranged while others consisted of many ideas linked together, perhaps with feedback loops.

This was a common approach. This approach was similar to a concept map and allowed students to express their report findings in summary form. It also allowed them to experiment with the production of meaning using images and symbols. At the same time, though, students were able to retain a familiar narrative, temporal structure within which they could communicate their central message by using arrows, for example, to indicate sequencing where one idea leads to another and so on. The feedback loops, arrows and the like provided a temporality to the network of action, events and symbols (Boje, 2002: 2).

- ***Comic book approach.*** Another sub-type of the categorical approach was the use of comic books. This approach was similar to the diagrammatic approach in that students attempted to employ by using chronology. The comic book approach is a conventional and common narrative genre for making sense of social action. As a conventional form of visual communication, the comic book approach allowed students to use images to depict key ideas and the text to advance the narrative. The main elements of the story were portrayed in a series of panels with the bulk of meaning derived from the visual material, supplemented by text. This type of approach was not common, as it required the students to possess considerable drawing ability, or the capacity to use computer programs to create cartoons.
- ***Dualist organisation.*** A third sub-type of the categorical approach used dualist organisation. Rather than using temporality, visual comparisons were deployed to illustrate a message through a juxtaposition of contrasts or oppositions. Common dichotomies

included: right/wrong, good/bad, successful/unsuccessful, positive/negative, win/lose, safe/unsafe, past/present, and so on. Students often used this dualist approach to impart meaning by contrasting a desirable course of action or state of affairs with an undesirable one. The contrast highlighted not only the benefits of the former, but also the negative consequences of the latter. This communication approach therefore contained a strong normative or allegorical message about how organisations should and should not conduct their employment relations.

Students sometimes used dramatic images to contrast positive and negative attributes. This style of poster was not heavily dependent on text, although text was sometimes used to denote main ideas or to give additional meaning to the arrangement of images and symbols. In some cases, students only highlighted one side of the binary opposition such as using ‘ticks’ to indicate the correct approach or solution while the opposite case was implied but not stated. Figure 6 is an example of the dualist approach.

In summary, the common characteristic of these three sub-types described above was that each sub-type attempted to create a narrative. The main difference between these sub-types was the different devices used to create narrative. In the diagrammatic approach, chronology was developed by symbols to indicate the sequence of ideas to be interpreted as a narrative. In the comic book approach, the cartoon format allowed the key category of ideas to be expressed in panels with the written text tying the narrative of the panels together. In the dualist approach, the construction of oppositional categories generated an allegorical contrast between desirable and undesirable courses of action, views or state of affairs. This overall approach was akin to the multi-structural or relational categories in Biggs’s SOLO taxonomy in so far as students were exploring multiple concepts and the relations between them.

Metaphorical Approach

Another approach was to use metaphors. Metaphors imply a way of thinking, seeing and expressing oneself (Morgan, 1997: 4). Metaphor entails experiencing and understanding one thing in terms of another (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980:5). As such, metaphors are a mode of substitution (Czarniawska, 1998: 6). Metaphors provide a bridge between the unknown and the known. They facilitate the interpretation and construction of social reality (Putnam, Phillips and Chapman, 2002: 377). Metaphors condense stories and as such can be distinguished from

narratives (Czarniawska, 1998: 6). However, metaphors are always partial. They highlight certain characteristics and provide us with insights. At the same time, though, they obscure or downplay other elements of significance and thus distort our perceptions. Metaphors are not only ways of seeing but also ways of not seeing (Morgan, 1997: 348).

The metaphorical posters tended to be the most sophisticated posters both in terms of creativity of design and complexity of ideas. These posters were, in many ways 'imaged scenes' (Tufte, 1997: 127). An example of this type of approach can be seen in Figure 7. In terms of Biggs's taxonomy, this approach was either relational or extended abstract.

A common metaphor used by students was the staircase or ladder, which symbolised progress, advancement, elevation or improvement. Another common metaphor was the journey. For example, one group of students displayed the human resource performance appraisal cycle as a trip from Earth (where the goals were formed) via several planets (symbolising the steps of the cycle) to the destination, a distant star (symbolising performance improvement). Other journey metaphors included roads, railways and sea travel.

Other metaphors included: a barrier (obstacles or impediments to success), an umbrella (protective cover), a jigsaw (key ideas linked to form a solution), a scale (balancing the needs of competing groups/interests), a key (the secret to success), the blindfold (lack of awareness), the prison (a consequence of negligence), a sliced cake (shares for all), a contest (effort and the correct approach leads to victory), a recipe (ingredients for success) plus others.

Overall, comparing the methods chosen to the marks awarded, the metaphorical approach enabled students to develop sophisticated approaches to presenting their project conclusions.

Discussion

There has hitherto been a gap in understanding the various approaches to poster making. As teachers, we understand the various genres of writing, but have limited or no understanding of visual genres. Before we developed the set of approaches described above, students had no guidelines that could be used to develop their visual literacy, which left both students and teachers (the latter, in their marking role) at a disadvantage. While students had always been presented with examples of posters, and the lecturer discussed effective design with students, at

that time we did not have a method of explaining the differing modes of poster construction. Developing this categorisation has assisted us as teachers to explain to students the overarching approaches they can take, that goes beyond the ‘keep it simple and use few words’ type of advice, and encourages students to ‘meta-think’ their designs – their central findings, their main message, and how to best convey this to an audience at a glance – before they create their posters.

Further, the categorisation of posters gives both teachers and students a common ‘language’ to use when discussing the posters. One of the key features of the assessment item – indeed, it may be the most important aspect, pedagogically – is the opportunity for peer learning via the interaction between the students in a poster group and students in the larger tutorial and class groups. The posters become a teaching medium among class members, by which they can acquaint each other of the rich variety of studies they have done. Students and staff discuss the message of the posters, compare posters on similar themes with respect to similarities and differences in approach, and compare findings across industries. Hence the common language on visual critique assists students to decode posters as a way of further exploring their own and others’ work. ‘Does one metaphor for a certain issue work better than another, and why?’ could be one question asked. ‘Does this diagrammatic approach convey the central concept clearly, or could the poster be simplified and still convey the same message?’ is another. There are other aspects that are discussed in class with students: for instance, how well the poster relates to and reflects the industry chosen. A poster on training in the fast food industry might use a menu as its central organising feature; one on occupational health and safety in the mining industry (in which legislative concerns are important and human life the ultimate price) might choose starker images to convey its message than one on recruitment and selection in retail. These issues are pointed out to students as ways in which they can concretise the message of their posters and engage an audience’s attention. Hence providing a language of critique via the five approaches assists students not only in constructing their own posters, but also to move from merely enjoying looking at others’ posters, to directly engaging with them in a critical sense.

Not all of student groups adopted a single approach to producing the poster. Sometimes students would combine elements from a number of these approaches into one poster. Sometimes these types of posters were visually very ‘busy’ and confusing and difficult to interpret. Students

may have put a lot of effort into constructing them, but it was difficult to understand the central message.

The 'ideal types' of posters should be used in conjunction with 'real examples' of student posters, introducing the 'ideal types' first, early in semester when the assessment item is first discussed, and then showing 'real examples' (from previous semesters) which can be discussed and analysed using the ideal types.

Copyright considerations prevent us from reproducing actual student posters with this article

Conclusion

This paper has focussed on the use of poster categories to help students derive more benefit from poster assessment. In exploring this issue, 'How authentic is this type of assessment?' is a valid, overarching question. However, many professional settings require the presentation of information visually. The students undertaking this course specialise in a number of areas during their degree and later enter a variety of business vocations – accounting, finance, marketing, information systems and employment relations – in which presenting information, 'selling' a point of view and training others are vital skills. Graduates are required to assess staff training materials, reports on key issues to both staff and customers, and prepare audiovisual presentations and assess others' preparation of such presentations. All these require decision making both about content and form, including visual content. Although we are not suggesting that students ought to be trained to a professional standard to produce visual texts, developing skills in visual communication by methods such as poster assessment enhances the communication repertoire of students, enabling them to recognise that messages and meaning are created visually as well as aurally and by print. In that way, the higher education system produces graduates who are more multi-literate. 'Having a go' at creating meaning in a multi-literate way is enhanced by using visually-based assessment items. However, both lecturers and students need a categorisation system and a language to discuss poster composition. The five approaches to producing posters described in this article are a useful adjunct to increasing students' multi-literacy.

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