The Message Designer In Education

Gerry Mendelson

Know your audience — the hue and cry of the educational communicator. Surely this is an important factor in the art of communications. The Australian bushman, because of his cultural differences, is not expected to react to given stimuli in the same fashion as that of the American Mid-Westerner. A truism? Unnecessarily stated? Perhaps, but since analyzing the audience is such a key point in the communications cycle, it might be well to question the analysis itself.

How can one "know" his audience? It has been shown that two individuals with similar background, training, and cultural heritage react with marked differences to the same stimulus at the same time. Must we, therefore, know each member of an audience? Obviously, any attempt at communication on a mass level would fail if the aforementioned were indeed the case. It is logical to look for commonalities that tend to override the individual differences that exist between men. A number of cross-cultural commonalities are immediately apparent. Psychologically defined as needs, they occur in all men in all societies at all times. Murray(8) divided primary needs into three categories: a) needs that lead a person to take in things, which include the need to inhale air, the need for water, for food, and the need for sentience; b) needs that lead a person to put out things, which include the need for sex, lactation (in the mature female), the need to exhale, to urinate, and to defecate; and c) needs that leads a person to remove himself from a situation, which include the need to avoid uncomfortable heat and cold, and noxious or painful stimuli.

Information of this nature is useful to the communicator, but only in a general sense. These needs are basic, but are too general to be of real aid in the design of most communications. Secondary needs, however, can be specifically applied to the study of the communication process. The secondary needs are those which develop as a direct result of a person's experience. Examples range from the need for recognition in a social situation to needs dealing with aesthetics, i.e., the need to compose a piece of music, or paint a picture. The communication specialist is concerned with these secondary needs, or in a broader sense with personality traits that may stem directly from primary or secondary needs. Without delving into the complexities of personality traits, it seems plausible that those traits which are general enough to act as major categories by which men can be identified should be of prime concern to the educational communicator.

Among these categories is the realm of visual perception. This area includes the various diverse components of the visual world and the parts and composition of visuals (pictures) as well as the way people react and respond to this form of stimulation. It has been shown through the work of Werner, Wapner(10), and Witkin(11), that personality style and kinesthetic considerations must be taken into account. Prior to the application of research of this type, however, one must be familiar with the construction and classification of the visual material to be used.

This line of thinking leads us into the realm of the pictorial sign or symbol. Flemming(6), in trying to shed some light on this nebulous area, took the first steps in designing a taxonomy of the visual. A brief look at this document reveals the extreme complexity of the visual pictorial world. Still further digging into the

world of the picture turns up a series of enlightening aspects of visual communication. I. A. Taylor(9) undertook a series of laboratory experimentation dealing with perception and perceptual organization. His articles arm us with the needed backup for a good deal of what had previously been an intuitive approach to visual design. Further scientific support can be found in the writing of Berelson(2), Lowenfeld(7), Witkin(11) and Beittel and Burkhart(1). The basic approach in all these studies has been through the testing of subjects and their perception of given stimuli. In many cases, the investigator developed theories dealing with convergent and divergent thinking, creating models similar to that of J. P. Guilford(5). Similarity in investigators' thinking may be observed in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of Witkin's Analytical-Global Designations with other Typologies

Witkin	Field Independent analytical, less found by stimulus	Field Dependent global, less analytical, bound by visual physical field
Lowenfeld	Visual able to analyze and synthesize, transcends media	Haptic works within media bounds
Beittel and Burkhart	Spontaneous analytical	Academic global, bound by stimulus
Getzels and Jackson	High Creative not bound by stimulus, inner-directed	High Intelligence global, bound by stimulus
Guilford	Divergent Thinking limitless solutions	Convergent Thinking narrow search for a single correct answer

Throughout the literature available in the areas of perception and cognition, the investigators are constantly searching for and devising methods by which an audience may be categorized. The basis for production of visual material by commercial producers is linked very strongly with the commonalities found to exist in related audiences. MacMillan, Harper and Row, and Prentice-Hall, to name a few of these commercial producers, rely on the fact that school curricula throughout the nation are similar enough to allow mass-produced printed matter to be used.

Recently the United States Government has enacted legislation which further separates or defines group and audience commonalities. I am speaking of such programs as Headstart and the monies being allocated for the culturally-disadvantaged. The commercial publisher is right there with specialized materials (to be sold across the country) for the disadvantaged. The availability of such material is excellent, to all outward appearances. However, there are drawbacks, and the publishers would be first to recognize and admit to these. It becomes almost impossible for any media (printed, oral or visual) to mean the same thing to all people. At best the material is geared to the center section of the normal curve, the "average" students of a particular group. What provisions are made for the student who is either too bright or too slow or deviant in some other pertinent way? The solution is not wholly-programmed instruction or even computer-assisted instruction. The answer is both of these and more. To my way of thinking, the answer is a systems approach centering around a message design team.

It should be noted that when referring to a systems approach, this writer envisions an ecology of education. Items including such physical properties as lighting, temperature control, teacher appearance, physical layout and adequate materials are factors that may have important effects on the learning outcomes. But rather than describe in detail a complete ecology, I wish to dwell upon the message designer and, specifically, the role of local production in this ecology. Given any text and any classroom situation, it should be quite simple to discover areas of overlap: (where student and text are compatible) and areas of discord (where student and text are at tangents). It is in these latter areas that help is needed.

The inclusion of a message designer in the initial stages of planning might not necessarily eliminate areas of discord; however, it is probable that he would tend to lessen them. The concern is for the message designer, in an educational ecology. The need for supplementation of commercially produced materials for gross categories of learners by the production of these materials geared specifically toward sub-categories of learners who are not included in the 66-2/3 percent of the curve. To claim a role for the message designer which supplants commercial material is foolhardy and indefensible. To claim this role in terms of assistance and interpretation for those materials already in ex-

istence is not only defensible but also sound educational practice.

From earliest recorded times, communication has presented problems solved by those who have had need to communicate (for one reason or another). At present there exists a sound and growing body of knowledge and research with which a message designer can be trained and upon which he can function. In an educational society which is quickly shifting emphasis to an ecological approach, the role of the message designer becomes crucial. He becomes the channel through whom open lines of communication must flow in order to better implement the desired learner goals and behavioral changes. He stands based in research and practical application, able to function in these areas and interpret from one to another. This man should not be the technician, the graphic artist nor the screw-driver jockey. He should be an innovative, knowledgeable and highly sophisticated educator, functioning in a new and rapidly-changing climate of knowledge and possessing methods necessary for disseminating that knowledge.

Predictions of this educator's coming can be found in many of the publications in the area of Educational Communications. Wittich and Schuller(12), and Brown, Lewis and Harcleroad(3), to name a few, hint at this type of analysis when they speak in terms of the media choice for the task at hand. However, in many instances, the broad nature of the publication does not allow an in-depth analysis of the multitude of existing variables.

The message designer's role has become more sophisticated with the discovery and utilization of an ever-growing technology. As the mode of communication is extended to larger groups and masses of people, the need for formalizing the message designer's position becomes apparent. Today, as education desperately tries to catch up to the world's explosion of knowledge, the message designer's role becomes more critical. In direct competition with an auditory infinity and visual kaleidoscopic sequences, educational endeavors that range from single face-to-face meetings through addressing an assemblage become almost unthinkable without the direct involvement of a qualified and competent message designer, who might at this point be designated the Renaissance man of the communication field.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Beittel, Kenneth and Burkhart, Robert G., "Spontaneous, Divergent, and Academic Art Students", *Studies in Art Education*, Fall, 1963.
2. Berelson, Bernard, and Steiner, Gary A., *Human Behavior*, Harcourt, Brace and World, New York, 1964.
3. Brown, James, W., Lewis, Richard B., and Harcleroad, Fred F., *AV Instruction Materials and Methods*, McGraw-Hill Co., New York, 1964.
4. Getzels, J. W. and Jackson, R., *Creativity and Intelligence*, Wiley and Sons Inc., New York, 1962.
5. Guilford, J. P., "Three Faces of Intellect," *American Psychologist*, 14:469-479, 1959.
6. Flemming, Malcolm L., "Instructional Illustrations: A Survey of Types Occurring in Print Materials for Four Subject Areas," *NDEA PROJECT* 1381, Final Report, Washington, 1966.
7. Lowenfeld, Viktor, *Creative and Mental Growth*, MacMillan Company, New York, 1957.
8. Murray, G. *Personality: a Biosocial Approach to Origins and Structures*, New York, Harper, 1947.
9. Taylor, I. A., "Perception and Visual Communication," *Research, Principles, and Practices in Visual Communication*, Department of Audiovisual Instruction, National Education Association.
10. Wapner, Seymour and Werner, Heinz, *The Body Percept*, Random House, New York, 1965.
11. Witkin, H. A., et. al. *Psychological Differentiation*, Wiley and Sons, Inc., New York, 1963.
12. Wittich, Walter A. and Schuller, Charles F., *Audiovisual Materials, Their Nature and Use*, Harper and Row, New York, 1967.

Gerry B. Mendelson, is an Assistant Professor of Education in the Department of Educational Communications, University of Hawaii. Dr. Mendelson received both his B.A. and M.A. from New York, and his doctoral degree from the University of Indiana at Bloomington.