Part III
Visual Communication Training (Specific)

Philosophy and Principles*

A program in visual communication is a journey into lush and exciting territory overgrown with myths (such as a picture is worth a 1,000 words), techniques, and even research findings. But guideposts are few, maps almost non-existent, and even the boundaries not too well defined. (Try to define-- and defend -- your concept of "Visual" communication.)

Planning to blaze a trail in such an area calls for careful and realistic preparation. It calls for clear directions and modest minimum goals, the recognition of legitimate expectations of the participants, the ironing out of a few basic issues arising from these expectations, and the drawing up of a definite but flexible plan for the content and conduct of the program.

Who will attend the program? Let us deal with the most difficult -- and most rewarding -- situation: there will be some "visual specialists," others with some communications responsibilities but without special background in visual communication, and those with primarily administrative responsibilities. This type of attendance is difficult because it calls for a relatively complex organization. Yet it is rewarding because the functions of the specialist, the "general practitioner," and the policymaker are in reality interdependent and often intermixed in the same person.

The major problem is that of providing a setting in which a variety of expectations may be fulfilled, or at least recognized and dealt with. Some of these expectations will pertain to the conduct of the workshop, others to its content.

Expectations About Conduct

Let us consider first the expectations about conduct because these are likely to be more widely shared than expectations about content. Expectations about conduct are usually quite simple and straightforward. Yet, they are often overlooked. They are likely to be these:

1. The leadership should lead. It should have a clear plan to propose to the participants, and should take the initiative in implementing or in modifying it as necessary.

2. The staff should teach. Each member of the staff should appear in the role of an active exponent of some fairly coherent and integrated set of ideas or skills. He need not know "all the answers;" but he should be responsible for raising issues and making substantive contributions in the areas of his competence.

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3. The participants should **learn**. They should be exposed to new approaches, ideas, skills, facts--otherwise the enterprise is hardly worthwhile. More than being exposed, they should be given the opportunity to reflect, interact, exchange views, try to do or make things they have not tried before. But picking up bits of information does not fulfill the expectations of learning; participants legitimately expect to be either systematically changed or reinforced in their general outlook toward visual communication theory and practice.

4. Participants expect and accept some **prior agreements** about areas of content and principles of conduct. They are frustrated and annoyed when placed under pressure to exercise initiative in matters for which they feel unprepared, and to act in roles they feel are not theirs to assume. But they do expect to be consulted and to have a voice in deciding about specific time allocations and specific projects--at least after they have a clear understanding of what they are deciding.

5. Participants expect to **participate.** This means not only some voice in certain areas of policy, but also--and most often-- some recognition of special interests, abilities, contributions. While the staff is expected to establish some framework of theory and of practice, and to sketch in the general outlines and some specifics of the picture within that framework, participants expect to learn much from each other, and to leave their own imprint on the final product.

Expectations About Content

Expectations about the content of the program are likely to be more divergent than those concerning conduct. Some participants feel insecure in the technical, design, or operational aspects of visual communication. Others want to examine the rationale for what they are (or might be) doing. Still others seek answers to policy problems from research evidence. Some look for all three. How many express an explicit desire to gain greater insight into visual communication by conceptualizing the process, examining its parts, relationships, nature, and functions? One of the first objectives of the workshop should be to make it clear that without some conceptual agreements and understandings we cannot even talk about the communication process or demonstrate its functions, let alone clarify its operational or policy implications.

But all the above are legitimate expectations that need to be recognized. Passing the buck to the participants, or remaining ambiguous about these expectations is likely to create unnecessary floundering. On the other hand, decisions reached about the fulfillment of these expectations will appear arbitrary unless the bases for reaching the decisions are also made clear.

What are those bases? They are the grounds for resolving certain general issues raised by these expectations. Perhaps the most important of these issues are the following:

1. What are the uses and limitations of research findings in guiding action and deciding policy?

2. What is the relationship of theory to practice?

3. What is the desirable balance between staff initiative, participant initiative, and total group interaction?

Let us deal, briefly, with each of these.

Research and Policy

How useful is research information to the practitioner and the policy maker? That depends on the extent to which research findings can be generalized, and generalizations applied to specific situations. Much harm can be done by overlooking these limitations in our eagerness to seek "solutions" to concrete problems. Also, research findings are seldom clear-cut. "Research says" that note-taking during a film showing helps comprehension and retention. But "research says," also, that it interferes with learning! Obviously, the two studies were done in different situations and with different films. The question is: which is more comparable to the specific situation in question, and are comprehension and retention the main objectives of the showing?

"Research says" that people are most likely to be influenced if allowed to draw "their own conclusions." But in a single presentation they are more likely to agree with clearly stated explicit conclusions than with implicit ones; but if they are highly educated, they are more likely to change opinions if they hear both sides of an issue than if they hear only one side. What is the communicator to do?

When all is said and done, policy decisions are usually value judgements made after weighing alternatives, appraising concrete situations, taking into account the "given" factors, and considering the price of making changes for the sake of probable rewards.

Research information is most useful, first, in increasing the range of alternatives apparent to the policy maker and in alerting him to possibilities or probabilities he might not have been aware of before. It will seldom tell him just what to do. Secondly, research information is useful in helping the practitioner develop his theories about how communication works in a large variety of situations. This helps him make more intelligent value judgments in each specific case.

This brings us to our second issue, the question of theory and practice.

Theory and Practice

The "unity of theory and practice" is an admirable but widely misconstrued slogan. It is admirable because it is absolutely valid: a good theory <u>is</u> the most practical guide to action; theory without action is of no consequence; and action without theory may be of dire consequence.

But the slogan is often misconstrued in its application to training. Theory is general and abstract; practice is specific and concrete. One cannot practice "in general"; but specific practice can fit into a general concept. Therefore, the "unity of theory and practice" is really only possible--in practice. It <u>is</u> practice guided by theory; it <u>is not</u> theorizing about practice.

Yet theorizing about practice, conceptualizing activity, is what a training program can--and should--do. It helps to avoid confusion and frustration if we recognize that even learning certain skills and techniques in a training program is only a rehearsal of certain elements of practice, and that its major purpose is to help clarify concepts and generate insights that can organize practice along lines likely to be very different in the "field."

The goal of the "unity of theory and practice" can be sought by using a workshop or training program as an opportunity to reflect upon practice, to organize that reflection into useful patterns, to fill in the patterns with relevant information, and to engage in the kind of "practical" project activity that can best illustrate and amplify the theoretical insights.

Action and Interaction

Now we come back to the conduct of the program in view of the foregoing considerations. All we have said so far points to the following conclusions about planning the visual communication training program:

1. The staff should develop a plan built around an overall conceptual framework for the study of visual communications. The plan should make provisions for the consideration of specific practical problems in the light of general theoretical propositions. In other words, the program should include:

    a. The exposition and examination of a framework for the study of visual communication (this can structure and guide future discussion);

    b. The exposition and examination of theoretical and research propositions relevant to the various elements and aspects of the visual communication process;

    c. Selection of a number of specific problems in various areas of interest for purposes of application, demonstration, amplification (here the necessity to adapt any general proposition for specific purposes is the keynote);

d. Selection of a limited number of practice projects whose execution makes the solution of a series of specific problems necessary.

2. The staff should see to it that initiative is exercised at all times on behalf of central aims and objectives. This requires making decisions about three patterns of action:

a. Staff initiative and participant reaction is necessary in the development of a conceptual framework and the exposition of appropriate theoretical and research propositions;

b. Participant initiative and staff reaction is necessary in the selection of specific problems and projects. It is here that the relevance of special responsibilities, areas of interest and contributions can best be recognized and explored.

c. Total group interaction is necessary in the continuing evaluation of the program, in reviewing decisions regarding content and conduct, in the discussion of substantive presentations, and in the critique of workshop project presentations.

The schedule of proposed lesson plans for a visual communication training program is one attempt to implement some of these considerations. (See supplement to this manual) The trainer is reminded that this is only one of many possible approaches. What is needed in each instance is to apply the foregoing philosophy and principles in arriving at a specific approach. In the light of the foregoing, the program envisages four types of activity:

1. Substantive contributions concerning framework, theory and research, with appropriate discussion;
2. "Directed exercises" designed to apply theory and research to specific problems;
3. Workshop projects designed to provide an opportunity for the further exploration of common understandings about visual communication and of their implications in a variety of "field" problems;
4. Stock-taking of relevant interests and problems; selection, execution and critique of projects; evaluation of program.

Supplement to Communication Training Manual

This supplement, still in preparation, will consist of at least the following:

1. Outline lesson plans for each major sequence or section
    of a visual communication training program.   (Preliminary
    drafts of these lesson plans were distributed as handouts in
    the first session of this Visual Communication Training
    Program)

2. Copies of handout or work materials pertinent to those
    lesson plans.

3. Annotated bibliography of training materials (particularly
    motion pictures) that may be useful in certain visual
    communication training sessions.