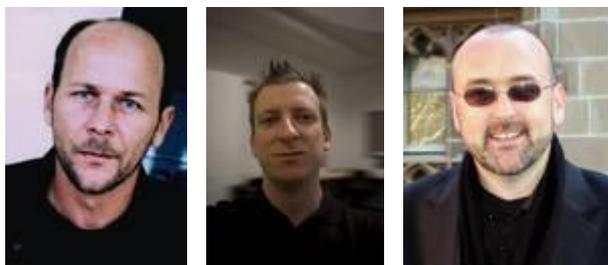


➔ From boys to men: Visual literacies in schools and prisons

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Photo by S.



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Abstract

This article examines two innovative, practice-led research projects into visual literacy and rich learning; one with 14-year-old boys at a suburban school, and the other with men in a maximum security prison. The authors identify a range of immediate benefits to the participants, including transformation from being the object of research to the roles of active subjects and co-researchers. The quality of the images produced by participants suggests that the consumption of increasingly sophisticated visual media in the spheres of entertainment and advertising can provide comprehensive training in visual literacy that is distinct from more traditional forms of education. The authors argue that the increasing stimulation of visual communication and its impact on literacy education has significant implications and opportunities for research and curriculum development. All images reproduced here are used with the photographers' permission.

Introduction

New literacies

The rapid growth in digital communications has profound implications for how we conceptualise and deliver education. Luke (2001) identifies the need to rethink knowledge as design in order to understand and create multi-media products, and Kress (1999) has described this turn to the visual as a tectonic shift in how we learn and communicate (p.69). Similarly, Kellner (2002) identifies the need to rethink education in ways that promote creative engagement and the cognitive capabilities required to read and write messages critically in new media forms.

Exponential advances in communication technologies have inaugurated wide-ranging debates about reconfiguring literacy education from its singular focus on text-based reading and writing to a broader set of skills often encapsulated by the term 'multiliteracies'. This term emerged from the influential New London Groups A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies (1996) and is generally meant to reference the inter-related literacies brought to the fore by new technologies but nonetheless inherent in traditional forms of communication. While there is much debate about its constituent forms, and how these are activated and interpreted

(semiotics, power, citizenship, creativity, work skills, etc), the New London Groups six ?grammars constitute a generally accepted taxonomy. They include patterns of meaning and production deriving from linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial and the multimodal forms available via new technologies. Some academics, for example Cope and Kalantzis (2000), add ?technical or ?computer literacies to the list. One of the most useful and precise definitions of literacy in the digital age is the flexible and sustainable mastery of a repertoire of practices with the texts of traditional and new communications technologies via spoken language, print and multimedia (Luke, Freebody & Land, 2000).

It is important to note, particularly for this article, that while there is considerable scope for digital communications to simultaneously embrace many forms and media, this does not mean that products are necessarily originated or presented solely within digital environments. Digital projects can have print outcomes and can be developed with analogue equipment, for example, photographs for greeting cards, posters and postcards. Computers are both a screen and print technology, facilitating multiple inputs and outputs with authorship increasingly located in the interrelationships between these processes for both the ?reader and the ?writer, an increasingly misleading distinction.

There is no point in decrying the decline of reading and writing. The collapse of traditional distinctions between writers and readers, print and screen, text and image, to name a few structural oppositions, aligns with the emerging learning requisites of the new knowledge economy: the changes which have so transformed the world in recent years demand a re-conceptualisation of literacy to encompass a broader range of capabilities than in the past, and in recognition of its contingent qualities (Lonsdale & McCurry, 2004, p. 36). In seeking to improve literacy it makes little sense to continue to think and talk about literacy practices and the use of information and communication technologies as if they were separate activities: literacy education is equally and simultaneously digital literacy education (Snyder, Jones, & Lo Bianco, 2005, p.8).

Rich tasks

Responding to these priorities, the pilot visual literacy courses developed and trialed ?rich task learning activities, a post-constructivist approach that is rapidly gaining currency (Education Queensland, 2000). Rich tasks enable multiple conceptual and content dimensions to be dealt with simultaneously, both developing and engaging with learners existing range of literacies, particularly their interest in visual, oral and performance (e.g. gestural) modalities, which seem to be the dominant communication characteristics of disengaged boys and male prisoners (Balfour, 2004; Baim, Brookes, & Mountford, 2002).

The complexities inherent in rich tasks foster the acquisition of multiliteracies and prompt essential developments such as learning to learn, self-directed learning, transferring knowledge contexts, and inquiry-based learning, while supporting and developing existing learner competencies (Education Queensland, 2000). Rich tasks are typically, although not always explicitly, embedded in an overarching notion of design. They enable multi-faceted team inputs ?managed by a design brief that requires wide ranging inter-textual inputs and multiple integrated outputs (for example a short film, posters, a web site, reflective journal, audio interviews and oral presentations). The New London Group points out that a notion of ?design best describes the way these complex inputs and outputs are connected and organised (1996), an idea that is being developed by several contemporary researchers, including Kress (2003) and Cope et al. (2000).

Rich tasks involve stronger activity-based and more authentic learning experiences than typical classroom literacy courses. They prompt ?whole body learning (OToole, 1997) and encourage students to work in project-based teams across a wide range of media, drawing on their own communication practices. This approach is useful for engaging disenfranchised students: learning is strongest and most meaningful when it engages boys actively, connects with their own knowledge and understanding and relates to their interests and experience (DEST, 2003, p. xxiv). Rich tasks can also involve high levels of creativity, increasing students self-esteem and commitment to learning: the arts provided a reason, and sometimes the only reason, for being engaged with school (Fiske, 1999, p. ix; see also Robinson, 2001).

Creativity and literacy From boys to men **The case studies: ?Closer and ?Maximum Exposure**

With funding from the Victorian Schools Innovation Commission (VSIC) and a consortium of Victorian TAFES, and with the significant involvement of teachers and senior staff, Richard Jones devised and taught two pilot visual literacy courses in Melbourne, Australia. The Victorian College of the Arts provided equipment, facilities and in-kind staff support. Each pilot was implemented over a period of two months and was based in a mix of photography and design via practical, activity-based classes with tangible outcomes, including large format photographs and posters.

Closer was conducted with 14-year-old boys at an outer suburban school and Maximum Exposure was undertaken with men in a maximum security prison. The projects sought to produce preliminary evidence to show that the skills developed through rich task creative projects are compatible with those promoted by traditional literacy courses. They examined how creative programs can improve critical thinking and increase engagement in learning by valuing creativity as a driver of success in literacy classes. This work was particularly focussed on modelling new teaching methods and developing an appropriate evaluation methodology for a longitudinal study. To date the research is qualitative and primarily based on journal notes, interviews with students and teachers, and comments from an expert review panel comprised of teachers, senior policy officers, researchers and academics.

While these courses involved developing a range of literacies, they were positioned as visual literacy projects to emphasise visuality as the primary way of connecting with the students skills and cultures. Teachers worked with students explicitly in the context of literacy, rather than visual arts, arts therapy, or recreational activities. The projects were conducted with minimal production equipment, computer facilities, and software: two 35-mm cameras, a batch of disposable cameras, basic PCs and Photoshop software. Importantly, these programs were supported by English and Art teachers using an integrated approach and, in the case of the boys, had a high priority on computers as a print technology with assistance from the IT teacher.

It was clear from the outset that the problems of engaging male students are not generally related to the attitudes of individual teachers: the five teachers involved in the pilots showed remarkable commitment in seeking new ways to re-engage their students. Rather, these problems are systemic and related to the relatively recent (and slow) development of education policies and curricula embracing multiliteracies, and a second level of challenges deriving from resourcing, staffing, timetabling, skills and assessment issues. These issues are magnified in prisons by an additional layer of complexity related to security requirements.

The two pilot projects were similar, although differences emerged from a stronger vocational approach taken with the men, and limitations involved in taking photos in a maximum security prison. However, the teaching strategies were the same, enabling cross-referencing of processes and results. The limitations of shooting in a prison, including not using telephoto lenses and only shooting in carefully defined areas, did not lower the volume or quality of the work however. If anything, it challenged participants to extract the best possible images from a ?small world, providing a solutions focus for many classes. For example, one solution, based on Robert Bressons famous advice to young film makers to make only those films that without you would never be seen, was to focus students on finding those shots that no one else would even notice (see Figure 21).

Traditional photography

Students learned to pull apart, clean, load and operate ?old fashioned film cameras (Figure 1). Eyebrows were raised when it was proposed that students would be using analogue instead of digital cameras. But as the project progressed the value of this approach became increasingly apparent. While images were scanned and manipulated in digital formats, a strong preference emerged for originating on film, as students became increasingly interested in learning the craft of photography.

Digital cameras were less useful, in the context of engaging the students, for several reasons. They produce immediate results and can easily prompt a ?click until you get something approach. With film cameras, the disciplines involved in having to anticipate results are much higher, as is the capacity to learn how to manipulate and control light. This approach substantially contributed to ensuring that the courses were seen as learning, not just as recreational programs that configured engagement as ?fun. Teachers concentrated on the science and mechanics of the camera, and the complex relationships between concepts, aesthetics and techniques.

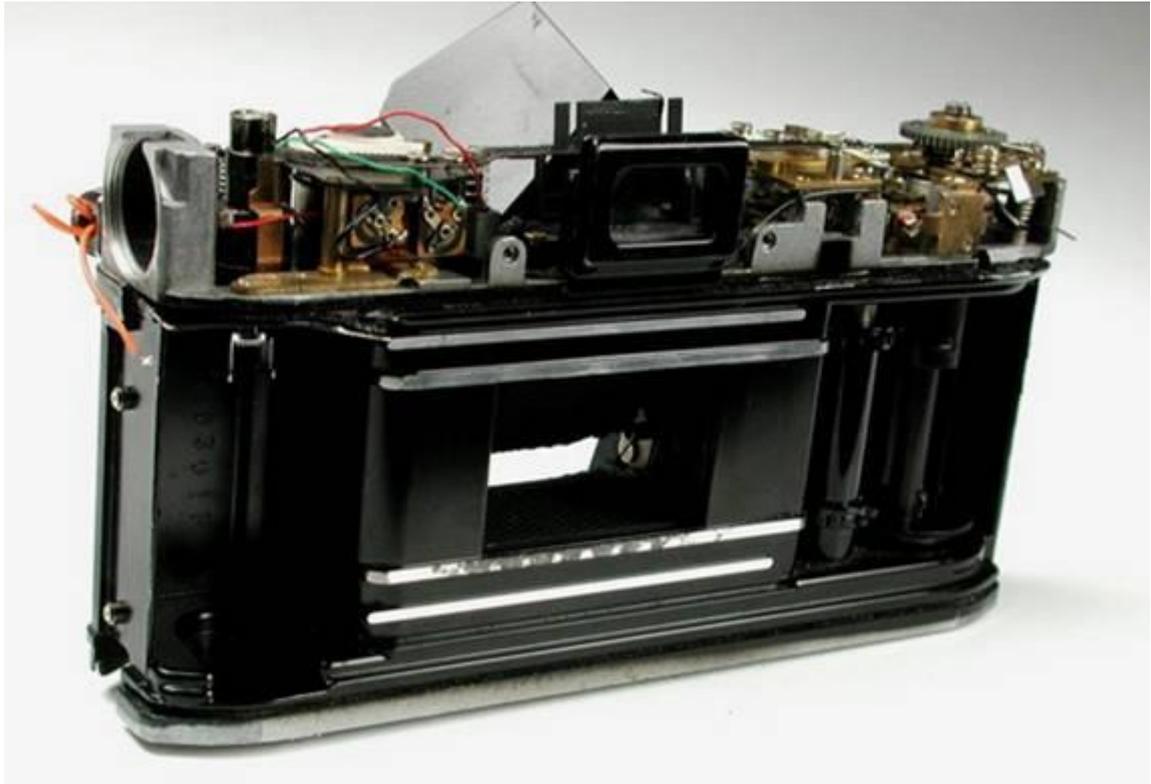


Figure 1: Canon Australia

The camera is a machine

Students said that they would not take art or poetry classes: they didn't see themselves (or want to be seen by others) as 'arty'. This was miles away from where they were or wanted to be. They preferred technical learning. While their work is generally seen as 'art' by audiences, this was a happy and predictable by-product of the classes, not their focus or motivation.

Using traditional cameras enabled the relationships between light, aperture, shutter speed and film stock to be explored in great depth. Students investigated how to obtain particular effects and performed complex mathematical equations to get their photos working in the ways they envisaged. Using manual film cameras also facilitated cross-referencing to the students' passion for all things mechanical, ensuring that they felt immediately confident and respected (Figure 2). This approach fundamentally shifted 'remedial literacy' from a deficit to a competency model. It also inaugurated a key teaching and learning metaphor. The students quickly understood that fine-tuning a camera mechanically was essential for peak performance, and that their control of shutter speed, aperture, lens size and focus was like a racing car driver working simultaneously with clutch, gears, suspension, and brakes.



Figure 2. Photo by SB.

The technical challenges were central to winning and sustaining engagement. They moved the focus away from trying to be "clever and onto how to best resolve an idea using an appropriate technique. In this way, students were drawn into creativity, without pressure to be artistic. Interestingly, the images audiences most enjoyed and, in the case of the boys images, purchased, were ones most firmly grounded in technique, and these photos were often seen as having powerful aesthetic and conceptual dimensions.

The hook

A key benefit of using film was that students had to anticipate the results of their work, waiting for a week before the prints were returned. They couldn't just "shoot and see, as you can with a digital camera. With limited film stock, students had to plan shots carefully, aiming to get three good ones out of twelve, a rigorous shooting ratio of 4:1. Of course mistakes were made, and at times students chose to set up the same shot again. In educational terms they were demonstrating an ability to anticipate the consequences of their decisions and showing sustained interest in learning through revision and correction. Their thinking processes, often quite scattered, excitable and unfocused, were slowing down, as a methodical technical process took over. The disciplines of the craft quickly stood in for the "discipline generated by a teacher when working with disengaged students in a classroom. Both students and teachers noted this significant shift in the usual dynamic.

In the case of the men, whose participation in education is voluntary, using film ensured very high attendance and no attrition. The men showed the usual curiosity to see their shots printed, no doubt magnified by being able to take photographs in prison. This combined with a strong technical interest in seeing if their shots turned out the way they were planned, for example a silhouette that relied on sophisticated exposure control (Figure 3).

One prisoner was to complete his sentence before the class was to end. The men joked about whether he would stay inside just to finish the course. With good humour, he eventually

announced that 4382 days was long enough, and that he couldn't get out a minute too soon. However, he said that he wanted to enrol in a computer design certificate course on the outside.



Figure 3. Photo by M.

Portraiture

As anticipated, portraiture was a powerful motivator of engagement and learning. However, we have agreed not to show the men's images to protect their privacy. These exceptional portraits have been presented, with their permission, in teaching and project development contexts.

Students would spend about an hour each week working on camera technique in the classroom and then apply their learning to taking photos of each other outside. This secured their commitment by utilising their interest in seeing images of themselves and each other. It had the added benefit of developing team spirit,

and an unexpected outcome. Students started crossing friendship, racial, religious and even gang borders that seem to be quite firmly maintained elsewhere, with the possible exception of sports activities.

They quickly realised that they should chose the best photographers in the class do their portraits, rather than a friend. Some of the quieter students came to the fore as they became increasingly sought-after for their skills and knowledge. Teachers observed that the usual pecking order was breaking down and that this reduced the need to discipline students for issues arising from rivalries and antagonisms between groups. The boys still pushed and punched each other, but this didnt escalate as it had in other classes, most likely because their status rules had shifted. Their ?display culture seemed to turn from who was the toughest, the most disruptive, or the best joker in class, to who could take the best photos.

Early exercises involved questions about how lighting can shape a face and how the same light source can highlight more than one element in the frame (Figure 4). At the same time students were rapidly figuring out focus, lens size, shutter speed and basic composition.



Figure 4. Photo by FI.

From portraiture the boys moved into a ?game that encouraged them to understand and use symbols to stand in for characters, learning about metaphor and metonymy along the way. Each boy chose a classmate to represent using only a photo of objects, and in the next week the class had to guess who was being

portrayed (Figure 5). This exercise prompted a great deal of productive discussion and helped the English teacher make direct references to use of symbolism in a text they were studying.



Figure 5. Photo by AB.

Shadows and light

Using film cameras also enabled a concentration on the choices that need to be made to create mood and atmosphere through different exposure settings. Digital cameras usually don't allow sophisticated manual settings, or if they do, it is easy to flick over to auto. Manual cameras however forced students to notice light. Complex technical exercises, for example working with contrast ratios, quickly moved into aesthetic discussions about how light can support or counterpoint the character of a subject, often with references to images found in the library. Henri Cartier-Bresson and Steve McCurry were favourites.



Figure 6. Photo by SB.

Most boys took cameras home to get dawn and dusk shots, particularly to explore the edges of acceptable exposure when the light is almost gone (Figure 6), and to try to capture shots in the "golden hour, the time before sunset when light is distinctively rich and cinematic (Figure 7).

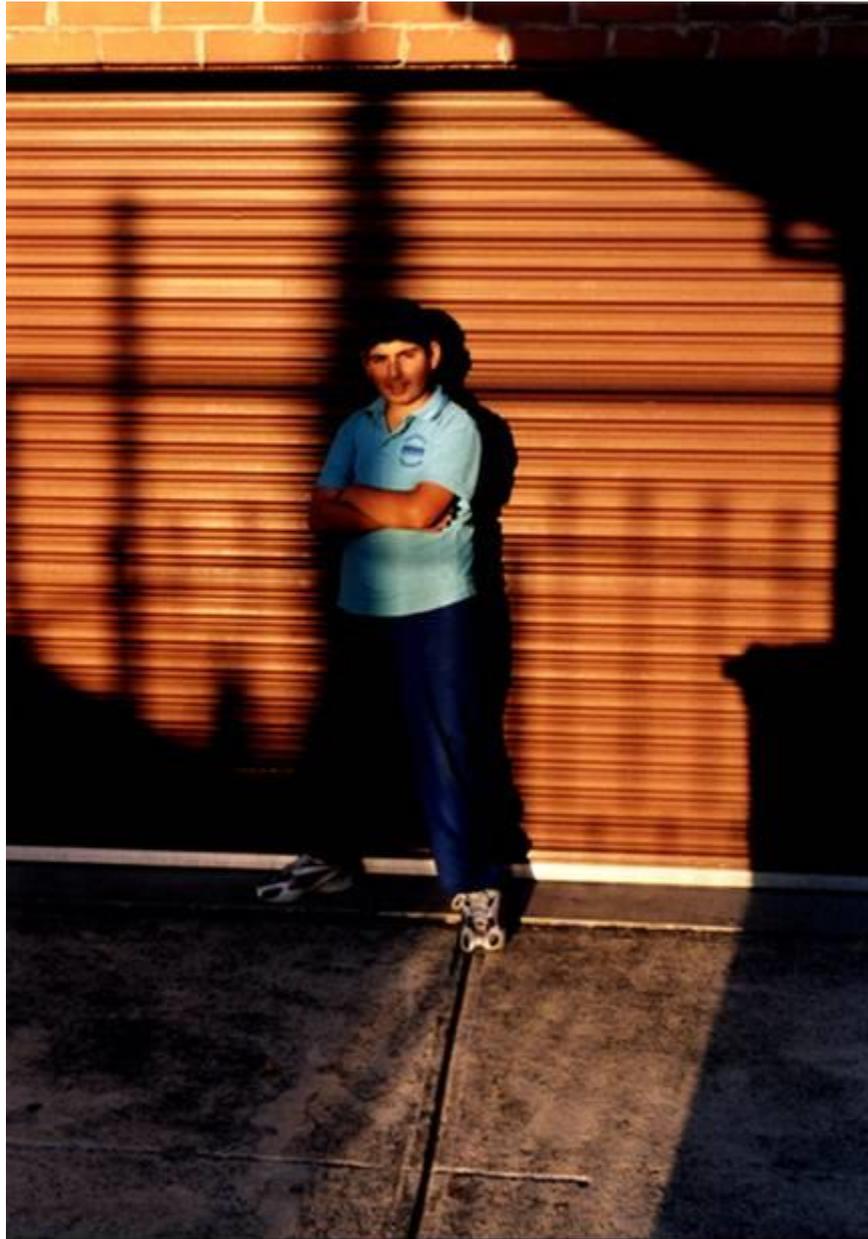


Figure 7. Photo by EM.

Students learned to observe their environment carefully and to plan their shoots for the best time of day, another part of the attempt to slow down and focus their thinking. There was an almost Buddhist meditation involved in looking closely and waiting for the light. The time you first see the shot may not be the best time to take it. And so the students would often observe objects over time, taking into account the changing play of shadows and light (Figures 8, 9 and 10). This built up a strong sense of place and the distinctive character of each world emerged. Despite the fact that portraiture was the primary motivation for students, audiences particularly appreciated images that showed an interest in light and shadows.



Figure 8. Photo by FI.



Figures 9 and 10, both photos by AB.

Composition

In both projects, emphasis was given to framing and composition, starting with Renaissance traditions, for example the rule of thirds, and then moving into using dramatic angles to create a sense of character (Figure 11).

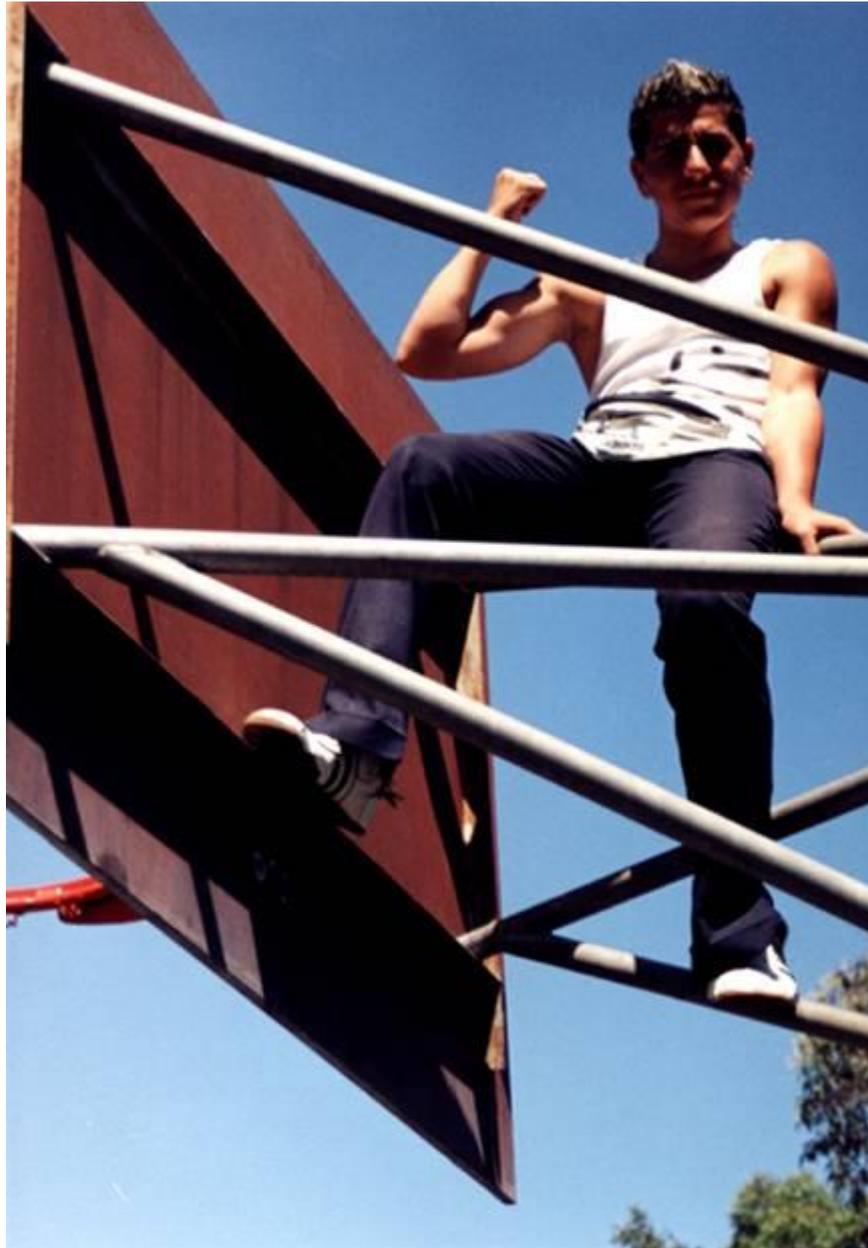


Figure 11. Photo by HK.

Class discussions were based around how to create interest and emotion through composition, for example by differentiating angles in the foreground and background (Figure 12). Both cohorts showed a high commitment to learning the rules and obtaining shots that illustrated that they understood framing techniques. The boys particularly seemed to want the rules and talked about how they found this made their photos better.



Figure 12. Photo by FI.

However, as their confidence grew, so did their interest in experimenting. For example, towards the end of the course a local soccer star was invited to visit the school for an exercise designed to give the boys experience in directing. In preparing for the shoot they researched sports photography on line and chose to create a classic 'hero shot' (Figure 13).



Figure 13. Photo by HK.

Once they felt they had succeeded with this shot, the boys experimented with different shutter speeds and angles. They sought innovation, rather than being satisfied with achieving one good ?conventional shot, although being able to reach this benchmark was a good start. The shoots were always based on sequences, and students were encouraged to add into each set a more intuitive angle, or take, on the subject (Figures 14 and 15).



Figures 14 and 15. Photos by SB.

Depth of field

The most enduring set of technical exercises was a detailed examination of how to create different depths of field using a complex mathematical relationship between film stock, aperture, shutter speed, and lens size. Depth of field identifies the area in the foreground and background that remains sharp, usually measured from the main subject in the frame. An important step in moving from an amateur to professional photographer is the conscious control of this field, for example to create an immediate drop in focus behind the main subject (Figures 16 and 17).



Figure 16. Photo by T.

Some students conducted systematic experiments, taking exactly the same shot with different settings to explore their options. They recorded settings and then compared the prints to their notes. They became experts and took great pride in helping others to work out depth of field options. Technical choices became

aesthetic considerations as they applied their learning to create character and mood, or to emphasise textures and shapes within the frame.



Figure 17. Photo by A.

Thematic pursuits

Text-based and oral literacies were not forgotten with this focus on visual communication. Critical to the success of both courses was a series of class-devised themes. Students were guided to find an overarching theme as it emerged from their technical exercises. Importantly the initial focus on craft skills allowed the students interests to lead the way, rather than just reacting to teacher-initiated topics. They were given the freedom to shoot any image (within reason), provided they applied the particular technique in question. Lists of potential themes were created and refined in discussions focussed on moving from literal descriptions of content to more general categories, consciously abstracting and cross-referencing the images. With the boys the theme was then linked to the reading they were doing in their English class, and poster ideas were developed using quotes from contemporary song lyrics and street-talk colloquialisms. The boys, aged around 14 years, chose the themes of ?respect and ?pride, with an underlying exploration of ?what it is to become a man. The men worked with an old Hopi Indian expression I am my freedom, which prompted

ongoing class discussion and debate, and resulted in sets of interpretive photos including dramatic portraits and an iconic series of the birds that visit the prison (Figure 18).



Figure 18. Photo by S.

Printing and selection

Image, voice and text

The literacy melting pot was stirred each week by semi-structured discussions based around each new set of photos and designs. These discussions often demonstrated similar advances in literacy to those noted in *Champions of Change* (Fiske, 1999), for example a marked increase in use of if-then statements and scenario building followed by what if questions. Teachers helped students to use a wider range of adjectives to describe their images, to identify differences between subject and object, and to understand ?voice and point of view. These activities encouraged students to plan their work, and to anticipate viewer responses, including using journals to reflect on favourite photographs, in this case a portrait by Stephen McCurry (Figure 19).

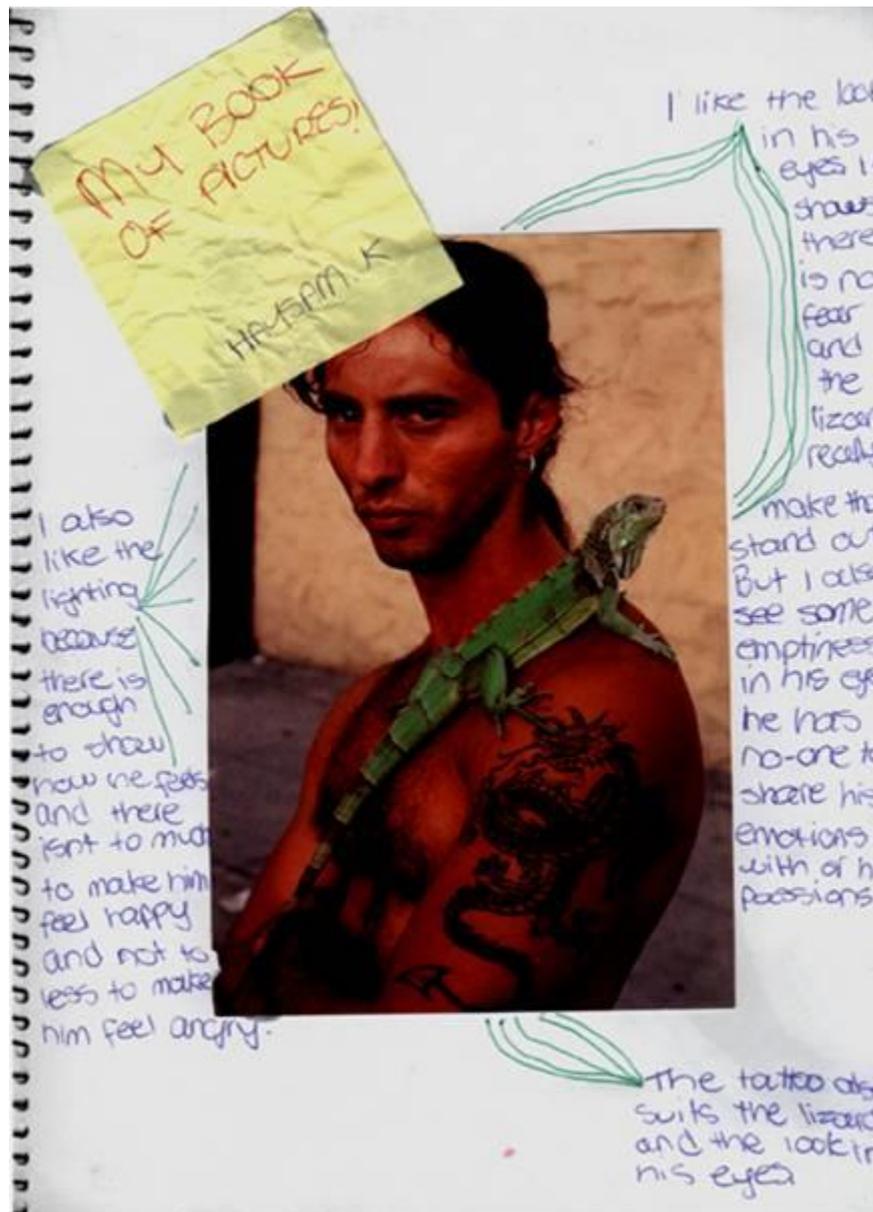


Figure 19. A page from HKs journal.

Students were also encouraged to immediately react to their images by writing their thoughts in pencil on the back of the prints when they got them back. Some chose quotes from a text compilation, a living document initially generated by the teachers that was then built with students ongoing contributions. Others used the opportunity to comment on their relationships, and one man directly addressed the aims of the course. ?F set out to master depth of field and in skilfully responding to this technical challenge also demonstrated an interest in the course objectives, representing his prior experiences of education with a touch of humour (Figure 20).



Figure 20. Photo and text by F.

Digital design

The boys moved further into design than the men, primarily because there was more time and better facilities in the school, although some of the men did initial design work for postcards. Design briefs were developed and the boys were able to work on their own or in teams. Interestingly, when they felt competent and assured, many would work on each others images, breaking down traditional literacy approaches and outdated notions of the individual writer and the reader. Students fell quite naturally into co-authorship, indicating a strong cultural base in reconstituting images generally derived from digital remixing, a prevalent activity among participants. Gradually, creative teams formed, with some boys spending a great deal more time in the computer labs as designers and others preferring to concentrate on learning photography. Students gave each other briefs about what images were needed, the digital effects required, and what text, including font and size, needed to be layered onto the images, and where (Figure 21).

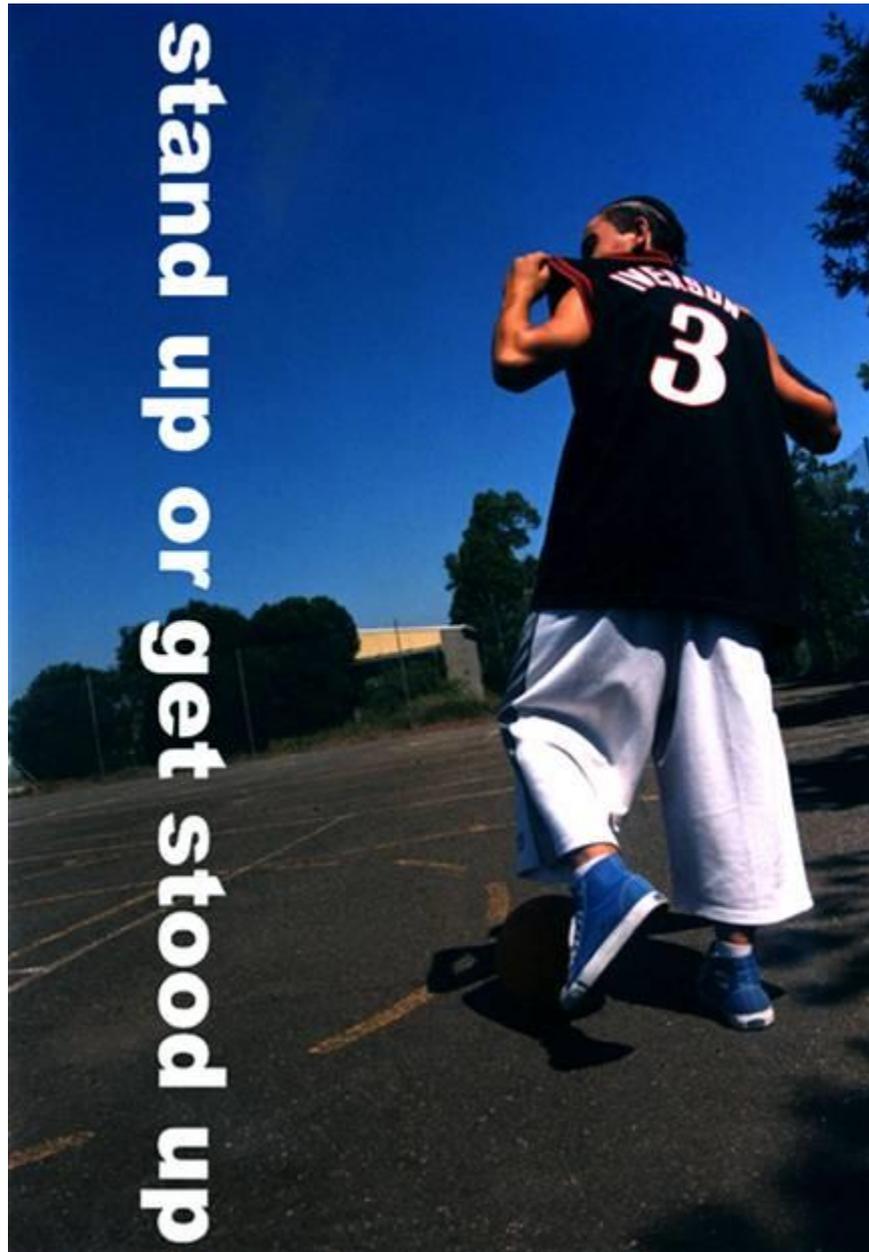


Figure 21. Photo and design HK and AB.

Social connectedness

The students were learning the ?grammars of photography and design in a similar way to learning traditional literacy, but with results that were more personally meaningful and had higher social exchange value than text-based literacy exercises. There were consistent indications that photography built social connectedness among the teachers, relatives and friends who saw the work emerging in both the school and prison environments. One of the strongest class exercises was a photo documentary series each boy did about a sibling or parent. These images are their most enduring legacy. They now grace relatives fridges, walls and mantelpieces, as the boys point out, all over the world.

Some men took photos that illustrated their feelings about missing their partners and children. Among these was a series of three flowers using highly refined depth of field (Figure 22). One flower is in full bloom, the other blooming, and the last one yet to bloom. The photographer explained that they represented his wife and his daughter, and that he was the one yet to bloom, because he was still in prison. This man wrote on the back of his photo a line from Henry van Dyke: for those who love, time is an eternity. As the courses progressed it became increasingly clear that the students were finding their own ?voice by acquiring

photographic techniques that, unlike their grammar and spelling lessons, facilitated a high level of confidence, competence, and communicative content, and said what they wanted to say, in their own way.



Figure 22. Photo by T.

Vocational potential Some boys made money out of their studies by taking shots of their teachers (Figure 23). Two even determined when the teachers were paid to increase sales: the sign of a true professional!



Figure 23. Photo by HK.

One boy has become the neighbourhood car photographer, and shoots on commission, producing large format prints for enthusiasts and the local garage (Figure 24).



Figure 24. Photo by SB.

In the prison, the hospitality teacher encouraged the men to link photography to the cooking classes, for example by doing product shots (Figure 25) and images of their meals to accompany menus (Figure 26).



Figure 25. Photo by J.

Some of the prisoners have vocational ambitions, while others see photography as a way to re-connect with family and friends. When he gets out, one prisoner wants to do large-format photos of flowers, frame them, and sell them at markets. Another is interested in photographing at car shows, doing fast-turn-around printing and getting the shots back in time to sell. One man is keen on photographing landscapes around his country town for tourist postcards, and another is hoping to enter a computer design course. Almost 70% of students in both pilots said that they would enrol in a further photography and design course, with about 50% indicating that they see these skills as useful in developing a career pathway. All participants emphasised the social value of their studies.



Figure 26. Photo by R.

Next steps

What emerged from these pilot courses was a distinctive set of literacy products that authentically portrayed the character and interests of students. *Closer* and *Maximum Exposure* have informed developments in other environments including an Australian Research Council grant with The Learning Federation creating online scientific literacy resources with disengaged boys, and work with homeless young people in Albury and Port Augusta. It has also led to a post-release program with female ex-prisoners and a funding application for a longitudinal evaluation study.

Conclusion

The success of these projects in engaging the visual skills of participants confirms the usefulness of practice-based research methodologies for extending existing research into forms of visual communication. In particular, practice-based research methods offer a range of advantages over more traditional forms of empirical or ethnographic enquiry, or what Haseman (2006) identifies as the distinct modes of quantitative/deductive or qualitative/inductive research.

Firstly, this form of research has the capacity to move beyond the simple models of mass communication as a simple linear process, what Hall (1994) describes as the sender/message/receiver model (p. 508). To use the terms of Hall's more sophisticated Encoding/Decoding model, practice-based research has the capacity to simultaneously investigate both the production and consumption of images (Hall, 1994), mixing opportunities for design innovation with rigorous forms of empirical evaluation (see Beattie, Cunningham, Jones & Zelenko, 2006).

Secondly, as Haseman (2006) notes, practice-led forms of research are highly compatible with the new demands on universities to commercialise and develop new partnerships for research. Haseman argues that the process of practice-led research is closely aligned with the processes of trialling and prototyping so common in applied commercial research and in the development of research applications for online education, virtual heritage, creative retail, cultural tourism and business-to-consumer applications (p. 106).

Finally, as these projects indicate, there are a range of immediate benefits to the participants, including the transformation from being the object of research to the roles of active subjects and co-researchers. The quality of the images produced by participants suggests that the consumption of increasingly sophisticated visual media in the spheres of entertainment and advertising do provide comprehensive training in visual

literacy that is distinct from more traditional forms of education. This adds weight to Johnsons 2005 thesis that recent trends such as the convergence between media platforms and genres and the increasing interpellation of consumers as active producers results in a democratic development of visual literacy within specific contexts.

Interestingly, discourses of art or creativity were not as useful in these projects as were the framing of visuality in terms of practical skills, notions of craft and technique, the ability to produce images of immediate utility, along with the potential for vocational applications. It is also clear that visual research must consider the ways in which the reception of images is highly contextual, to the degree that categories such as gender may shape and organise the development of skills in producing and reading visual forms. As with both these projects, practice-led research also offers opportunities for the further dissemination of the outcomes of the project as part of broader strategies of public engagement and education.

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