

PraxisNote No. 7

Working Without Words

Exploring the Use of
Cartooning and Illustration in
Organisational Capacity Building



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Introduction

This paper demonstrates the value of cartoons and illustrations as tools for capacity building in the context of both community and organisational development. Cartoons and illustrations are at the core of the author's own practice as a facilitator in community development and have been very much part of his own journey.

The paper is focused around a framework for how cartoons and illustrations can be used in capacity building, which involves three levels of usage:

- **artist led:** where cartoons and illustrations are used for communicating messages in an interesting and memorable way.
- **client informed:** where the artist assists the client in reflecting on situations and circumstances.
- **client led:** where a group or individual express their own feelings and aspirations. At this level the role of the facilitator is to provide analysis and explore meaning rather than influence or shape the drawing.

There are a number of risks and pitfalls in the use of cartoons and illustrations, which include:

- working cross-culturally
- potential manipulation of perceptions by a facilitator
- the need to recognise that cartoons and illustrations are not for everyone

However, drawing should be seen as one of many tools which can play an important role in enhancing creativity in the development sector. This links to the wider challenge of developing forms of communication, both traditional and modern, which allow approaches to organisational capacity building to be shared using a format, style and language which are accessible and relevant to a wide audience and can be adapted to local cultures and contexts.

Further work is needed on the use of cartoons in organisational capacity building with new multimedia technologies, as well as exploring the potential of more analytical approaches for understanding community and individual drawings.

A Personal Journey

As a child I battled with learning difficulties. Drawing and illustrating were essential coping strategies for expressing myself and for learning. The frustration of not being able to express myself easily in writing meant that I channelled my energy into exploring ideas, feelings and visions of the future via cartoon characters, largely inspired by books such as *Asterix*, *Obelix* and *Giles*¹.

In my teens I would create whole stories in cartoon strip or produce a whole page of an event with 50 different characters. Cartoons and doodles became codes for remembering facts and figures during my school and further education exams. While studying for my degree, cartoons were the only way I could keep up with the lectures and presentations, as my writing was too slow. It was only when I started working overseas as a community development worker in Central Africa that I started to use cartoons more publicly as a communication tool to supplement my poor French and Swahili.

I began to discover the role of visual images and cartoons as a means of provoking discussion, and I began generating cartoons specifically to explore issues raised by groups of farmers or women's groups. On returning to the UK and joining a relief and development agency, I found that cartoons could be effective for communicating new ideas to large groups, enhancing group work around strategic planning, and breaking down complex concepts into bite size chunks for groups to engage with. The three manuals 'Training for Transformation' by Anne Hope and Sally Timmel (1985 etc.) were a major influence.

¹ *Asterix* and *Obelix* – a series of comic strips, by Goscinny and Uderzo, published by Hodder and Stoughton since the early 1970s.

Giles – a series of annual books (1954–1986 Sunday and Daily Express Cartoons) published by Purnell Book Production Limited.

In heading up training programmes overseas, I found cartoons and illustrations could be used in a number of ways, including illustrating training materials, exploring themes for discussion, and summarising participants' learning.

My journey in cartooning and illustrating has led me to discover that this is not just a coping strategy for someone with learning difficulties, but an exciting and valid means of stimulating learning and development in individuals and organisations, and the boundaries are now limitless.

What is a Cartoon? Why is it Important to Capacity Building?

'A cartoon is a drawing which simplifies and/or exaggerates' (Mallia 1987).

Cartoons are often drawn with great economy of line. In just a few strokes of the pen, the artist is able to capture the essence of an idea, or in the case of a caricaturist, to observe and exaggerate the key features of the subject. A cartoon presents the cartoonist's point of view, so you see what the cartoonist would like you to see. Cartoons encapsulate all aspects of life – from the serious to the humorous, and from the mundane to the important. This does not, however, exclude some cartoons from being intrinsically complex.

Cartoons are useful in capacity building because they highlight key issues and enable them to be viewed from a number of perspectives. It is the combination of exaggerated lines and humour which brings the message home in a profound and thought provoking way. This can allow local people to engage and connect with unfamiliar ideas by linking them with familiar characters, stories or images.

Cartoons appeal to the right side of the brain, which shows a dominant function in the following areas: rhythm, spatial awareness, gestalt, whole picture, imagination, daydreaming, colour and dimension. It has often been said, '*a picture speaks a thousand words*', and this is true of any illustrating work.

Visual intelligence can be boosted through imagery in terms of both generating ideas and enhancing memory². Visual images constantly solicit our attention, and our eyes take in more than all the other senses combined. We recall pictures, images and events because we are able to see them either in our mind or in reality. This impacts our memory beneficially, and by extension, generates creativity.

In my experience of reaching large groups with a core message or provoking debate in a way that is memorable and engaging, cartoons and illustrations are a very significant resource. Similarly, in working with vulnerable groups, cartoons are often an essential way of focusing dialogue and reflection (Buzan 1993).

The fun nature of cartoons opens up our minds, making them more receptive, and can stimulate creativity in a group.

Cartoons are extremely relevant to organisational capacity building in that they enhance the ability of development practitioners and clients to:

- see a different view of the world through the eyes of the cartoonist
- think and reflect creatively together about how to respond to the challenges of change
- stimulate a group to explore other perceptions not previously considered
- transmit messages in way that can be recalled

² See Mukerjea (1998), where the author mentions cartooning in a chapter entitled 'Idea visuals'.

- provide a means for a vulnerable community or organisation to express itself and its aspirations for the future

In developmental terms this is not only a participatory process but is in itself profoundly liberating, giving voice, insight and power which in some cases may previously have been unexpressed.

Use of Cartoons and Illustrations in Capacity Building

The framework in Table 1 provides an overview of three approaches where cartoons and illustrations have been used to enhance and support the capacity building process both at community and organisational development level.

Each approach is developmentally valid and is determined by the context and the nature of the overall capacity building intervention. Each could be used at different stages of an intervention and revisited as appropriate. The framework seeks to group the approaches so as to better understand their relevance and application.

It is important to recognise that the three main approaches discussed in what follows are not the only ways in which cartoons and illustrations are used in capacity building.

It should not be assumed that one approach is better than another or that there is a linear progression from the images of transmission, towards the groups and individuals drawing for themselves, or that such progression is ultimately desirable or the most developmental.

There might also be some variations and some transitional approaches, which bridge one or more approach, as described below.

Table 1: Framework for reviewing the potential use of cartoons and illustrations in community and organisational development

Type of intervention	1. The facilitator uses images to transmit a message 	2. The facilitator creates images to enhance group work 	3. The facilitator enables groups and individuals to develop their own visual language 
Purpose	To enhance a message	To enhance the facilitating of groups	To enable self/group expression
Brief description	Ideas, approach, and drawings are selected in advance	The facilitator creates the images, but ideas and approach informed by group facilitation	Ideas, approach and drawing informed by the group/individuals but guided by the facilitator
Examples of approach	Illustrating educational materials: HIV/AIDS awareness	Codes for group discussion on the next steps in project plan/strategic plan/stakeholder reviews	Participatory led appraisals (PLA), group map their community or organisation
Key features of each approach	The artist is given a clear message to be communicated in terms of ideas, information - seeks to make the information more memorable	The artist gathers information about an issue from a group and then develops a set of images, or cartoons as codes for discussion - illustrates it in a way to become a code for provoking interaction and dialogue	The artist is not essential but good facilitation is - the drawing is guided by facilitation in terms of what could be drawn rather than how to draw it
Use	Simplify instructions: - Elevate blocks of text - Create a focus on key points - Break down complex ideas - Visual focal point	Enable groups to explore an issue together: - Explore different stories and issues for groups in conflict - Makes an issue more tangible	Enable a group to have a sense of ownership and control of their own ideas - Good for involving the whole group and different sub groups
Participation	Low	Medium	High
Relevance to organisational/ community development	Information communication	Community mobilisation/ organisational awareness and reflection, conflict resolution	Strategic planning, envisioning organisational assessment

1. Using Images to Transmit a Message

In this approach, the facilitator has particular perceptions of an issue and creates an image to match. This may typically include using illustrations to simplify instructions, elevate blocks of text, create a focus, make a point or break down complex concepts to make them more accessible.

The cartoon or illustration has enormous scope to inject informality and humour into what may either be dull text or a difficult complex subject, thereby increasing the attractiveness of the topic.

In the context of capacity building and organisational development, this approach has been used in educational and awareness-raising messages, to enhance training or presentation materials. However, in most of my work,

I try to provoke a reaction and not just let the drawing be a passive means of explaining the idea. The purpose is either to liven up concepts and ideas or to make complex issues more accessible.

Where there are complex issues, the key is to break up the ideas into a series of images, each of which can present different aspects of the idea. An essential principle is not to over complicate the image, as this then starts to undermine the accessibility. At the core of cartooning is the power of humour, which gives the message its bite. Traditionally, and certainly from the context of political cartooning, the focus is on the use of negative humour to bring the point home. Negative humour is often linked to exaggerating the consequences of taking a certain approach.

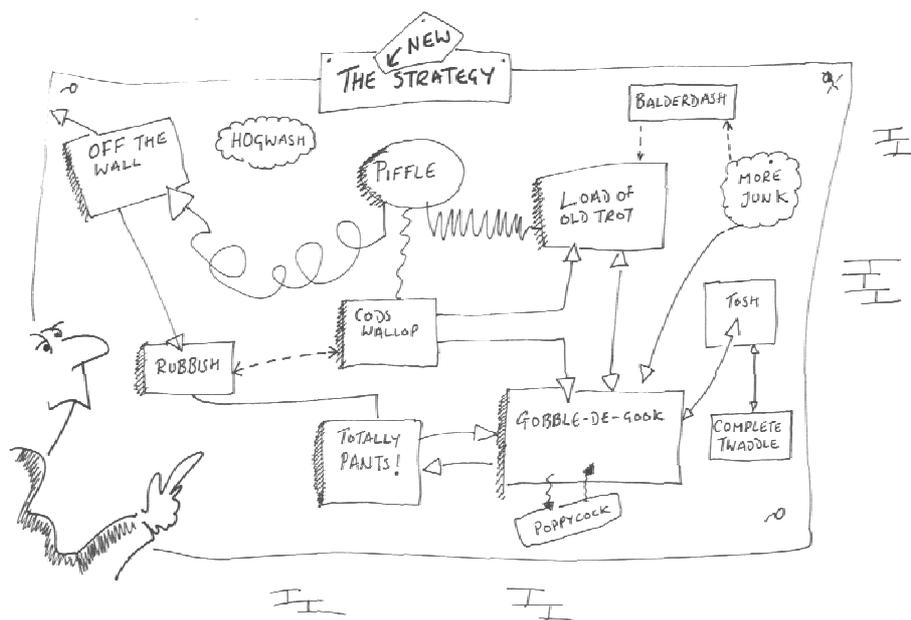


Figure 1: 'The strategy paper' © Bill Crooks

Figure 1 seeks to introduce the idea of strategic planning from a negative perspective in the hope of stimulating the reader to prevent their own strategic planning from becoming like the

illustration, and encouraging them to think about how the process can be the opposite (positive), and thereby breathe life into the organisation.

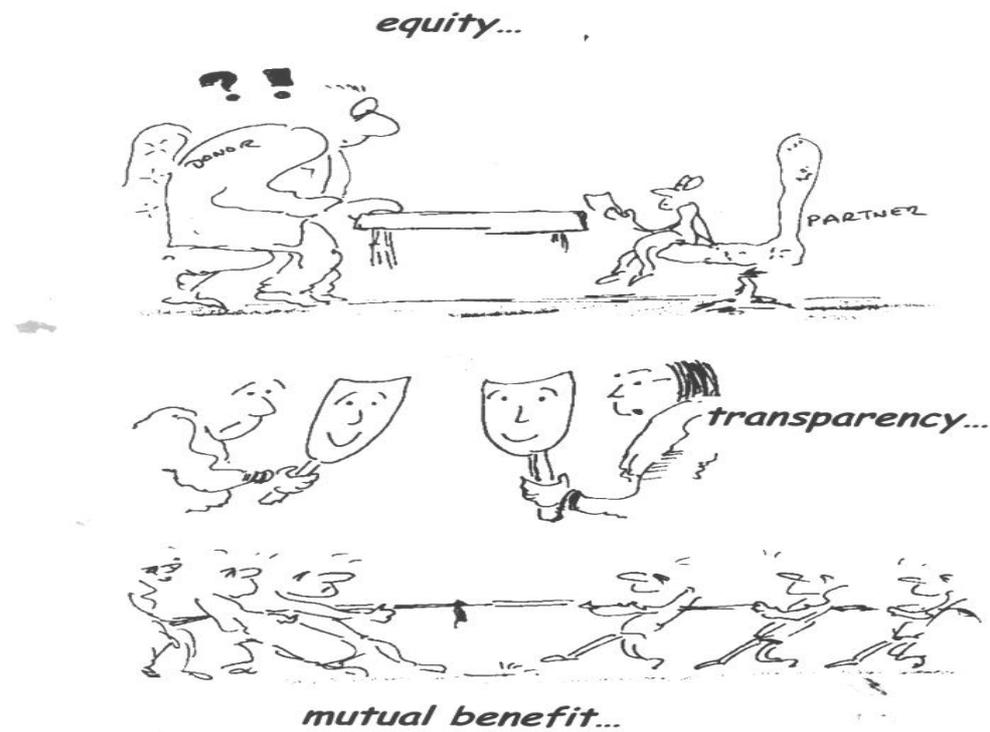


Figure 2: 'Perspectives on partnership' © Bill Crooks

The images in Figures 2 and 3 were used to introduce some of the ideas around partnership, in the context of some of the challenges faced by funders and the recipient civil society organisations. They also seek to challenge some of the ideals set out by funders.

Similar to Figure 1, they have a slightly negative element, but in the hope of reflecting some of the realities and dilemmas of how partnerships happen and what we can do to mitigate against the more negative elements. The idea of this negative aspect is to create a sense of irony as the reader of the images sees themselves being portrayed, which causes a knowing smile.

This approach is in essence about trying to convey a key message to an audience in the most stimulating, clear and memorable way. There is a strong case for using local artists in a cross-cultural setting, so that the humour and lines of figures are appropriate to the culture.

When I have attempted to use cartoons in another cultural context, I have been heavily criticised, because my style is essentially too Western, with the length of the nose often being the give away! More work needs to be done to find out how local artists and cartoonists can reflect and stimulate clear developmental messages.

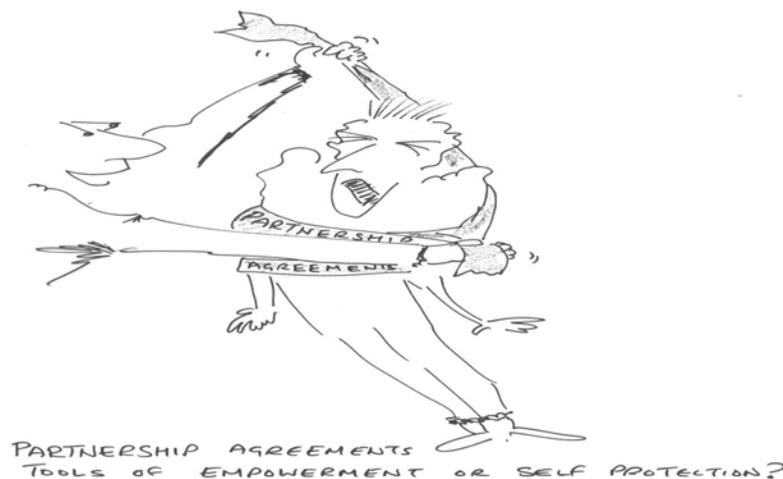


Figure 3: 'Partnership agreements' © Bill Crooks 2003

2. Creating Images to Enhance Group Work

'The clever group worker should use allegories, figures, wondrous speech or other hidden, roundabout ways to convey meaning and resolve difficult situations'. (Benson, 1987, p 203)

Cartoons and comic strips can be powerful reflective tools. Combining art, dialogue, situations and outcomes, they can tell the story succinctly and humorously. Cartoons offer a way of expressing feelings, anxieties, or other emotions that may not surface via question and answer sessions, interviews and other forms of direct dialogue. By capturing the essence of what is going on rather than attempting to be an exact record, cartoons can help us 'dig a little deeper' (Beard and Rhodes 2001).

The focus of this approach is on working with a group around issues that are live and need exploring. This may include assessing organisational or community needs, understanding conflicts, or envisioning the future of a community.

Information about an issue is gathered with a group. Then, with an artist or the facilitator, the group generates images that will provoke discussion, debate and active dialogue. In some cases, good group work often leads to a redrawing or graffiti-ing of the images as the group deepens its analysis of the problem.

Informed and influenced by Paulo Freire, Anne Hope and Sally Timmel have used this approach to explore innovative ways of getting communities to look at alternative learning through critical reflection and self-awareness (Hope and Timmel 1984). They used visual images or codes to capture information generated by discussions held in communities and presented them back, as problem posing materials.

This approach was extremely powerful as it enabled the communities to focus on a particular issue and begin to work together to analyse it. This process created an energy for change and sharing of ideas as to how a problem might be addressed. It is still widely recognised and used in different forms and remains one of the most powerful means of facilitating groups.

It was as a result of using this approach in my own work in Africa, facilitating community groups, that I started to apply it to working within organisations. The context might be somewhat different but the principles and approach are much the same. After all, most organisations are communities with many of the same power issues of leadership and control; they just tend to be more subtle.

I have used codes and images in the following areas: strategic planning, organisational assessment, exploring tensions and issues in partnership, and exploring internal cultures. In strategic planning, this approach can be used very powerfully when exploring the external environment. In the case of one major aid agency, the approach involved

creating a giant poster cartoon, measuring some 10 x 5 metres, of all the issues that could impact the organisation in the next 10 years. The 150 staff were invited to discuss it in small groups and then graffiti their comments and/or add more images.

This visual representation on such a large scale meant that everybody could participate without having to remember the key slides of a Powerpoint presentation. It also gave immediate energy to what can sometimes feel like a rather dry and academic process. To make this work, it is important to take plenty of time to gather all the information beforehand and explore a range of images with a few of the potential participants before deciding on the final big cartoon.



Figure 4: 'Niche crisis of NGOs' © Bill Crooks 2003

Another approach I have used entails live drawing of a situation as it occurs. This can help the group reflect on what is happening to them. This works best by starting to brainstorm what they think is happening and then getting them to identify images that might best illustrate

the current climate of the group. This is particularly good for taking the tension out of a situation and enabling the group to look at a conflict from another perspective.

An extension of this idea is to get the group to select prepared images (e.g. cartoons or photos). Beard and Rhodes (2001) explored the use of cartoons as reflective tools and concluded that for the non-artist/cartoonist, prepared images with speech bubbles might be more effective.

In one non-profit agency involved in youth development, the facilitator generated a cartoon to reflect the differences of opinion around the room over the acceptance of funding for a new project. The image helped the group to identify the actual issue at stake. They added to it in order to explore the tension further.

In the process of exploring the conflict summed up in the cartoon, the issue became less personal, and the group moved towards seeing it as a collective group issue rather than one with differing sides. The group engaged in the humour of the cartoon by suggesting more images that reflected their crisis. In effect it created an opportunity to look at themselves from the outside and see the dynamics of the situation.

3. Enabling Groups and Individuals to Develop their Own Visual Language

This last approach focuses on inspiring others to have a go at expressing themselves through their own cartoons and illustrations. The emphasis is on the client deciding on the images and how they are drawn.

The process is often focused around reflection on a situation or context that

individuals are engaged in. The most basic form of this is mind mapping, which is both a planning, recording and reflective tool. As confidence grows, mind mapping begins to add small images to help the mind recall key points and ideas. Many of the traditional participatory tools used in community development lend themselves to individuals adding their own images and cartoons to illustrate points of interest and concern.

An example of this mapping is where people draw a map of their community and record all the key points of interest. In my own experience this is where cartoons are drawn depicting scenes of crisis, festivity and celebration. This can easily be applied to organisations, in order to understand internal and external linkages and to explore values and culture. For example, time lines are particularly useful in reviewing the organisation over the period of the last year or ten years. The highs and lows are recorded along the time line. With a bit of encouragement, participants will start to illustrate the highs and lows.

One of my most powerful experiences of this was in Belfast in Northern Ireland where a cross-community project filled the time line with images of all the events, both positive and difficult, of the last year. The images transformed the initially rather dull time line into a dynamic document which the group has kept as an important piece of information, used to induct new staff as well as to reflect on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the organisation.

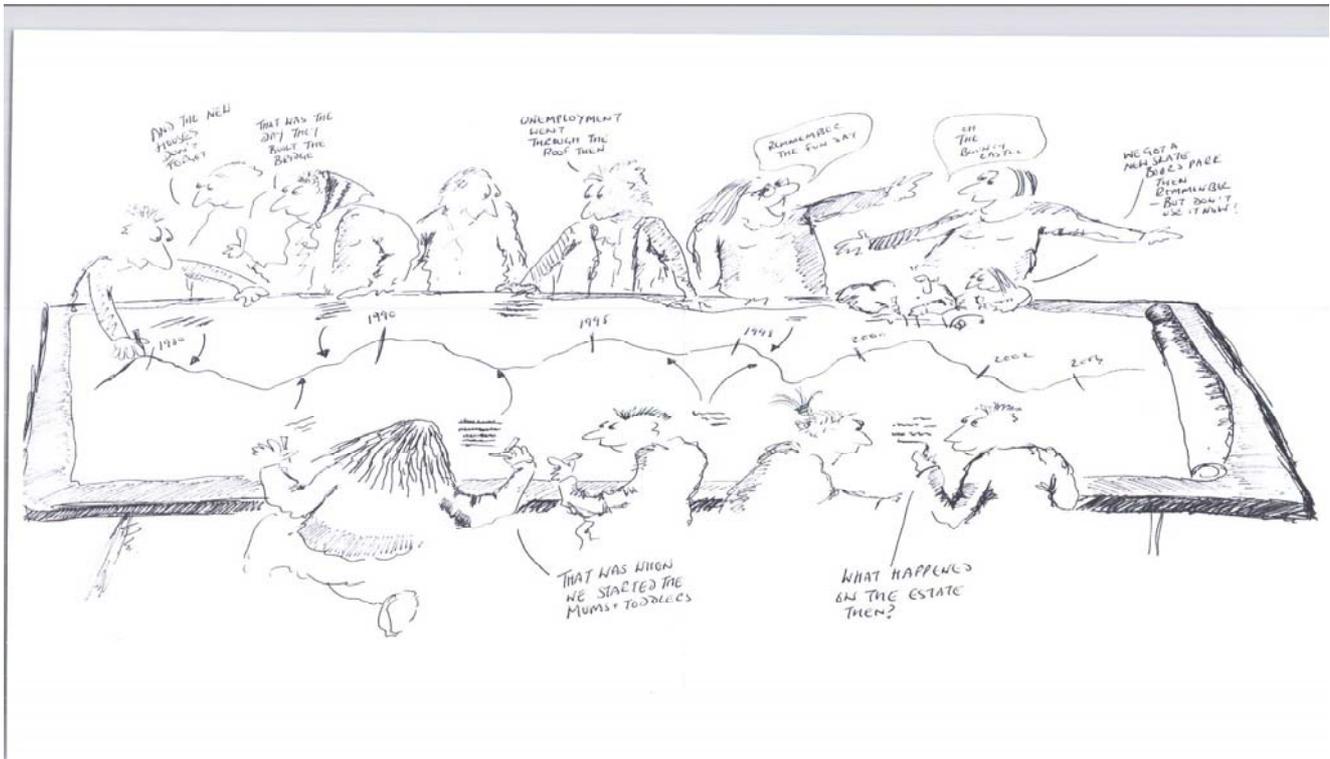


Figure 5: The timelines approach for self and group expression © Bill Crooks 2004

Another group-based activity used regularly by INTRAC is rich pictures. This involves an individual identifying an organisational issue that they would like to share with the rest of the group, in order to get their input and advice. They then draw and colour the issue, often expressed as a metaphor such as an animal or vehicle. In most cases all the

participants put a lot of effort into developing a picture, which then gets added to as the discussions progress. In many senses rich pictures become therapeutic tools where the participant develops a visual language to explore deeper issues that might not always be possible with words.

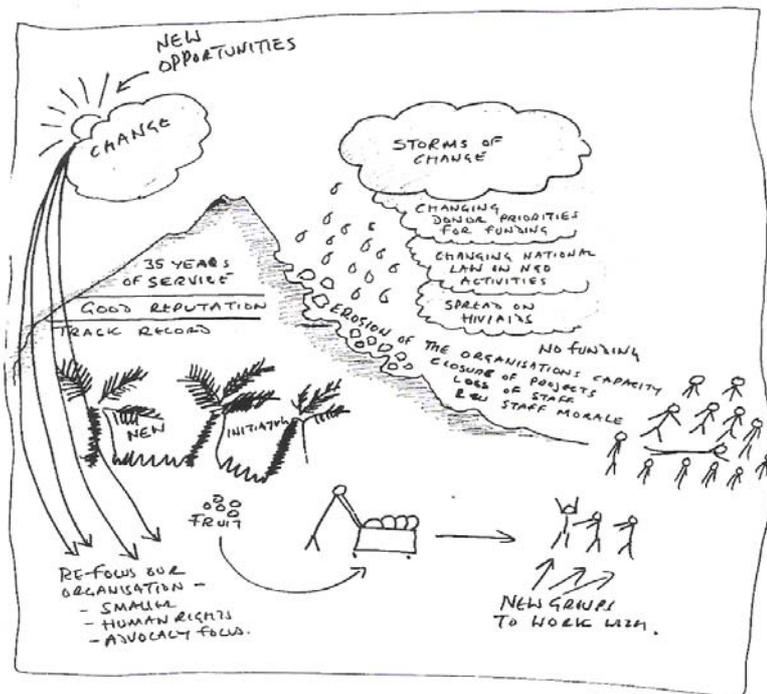


Figure 6: Example of a rich picture from an INTRAC course 2003

In another case, internal issues have been brought to the surface simply by asking all staff to draw images of the organisation as they see it. This approach was used to kick start a strategic review of a relief agency based in Northern Sudan. The individual images identified common themes of stress, burnout, lack of delegation, heavy workloads, as well as difference in perception between senior and middle management. The images gave important clues for the review to follow up. They also formed a light-hearted introduction to the review process and, more importantly, fostered a sense of ownership.

Cartoons and illustrations play an important role in exploring anxieties and feelings concerning organisational change. A case in point was a large statutory youth department where different teams were being merged under a nationwide organisational change process. The time line technique was used to review the process and the highs

and lows of the last 12 months. It was not until the participants were asked to draw pictures of the significant events for them, that the true feelings and concerns found a voice. At the end of the event, the director used the images to reflect with the change management group on how they could improve their approach with regard to merging the teams. In many ways, it was the humorous images that reflected the concern, rather than the words.

One approach that has been used to empower groups further is called graphical facilitation, pioneered by Jack Pearpoint (2002). Participants are taught some basic shapes, which a group can draw to express what the issues are for them, rather than having to survive solely on what is still the perception of the artist and/or the facilitator. This is only effective where the graphic facilitator is reasonably confident to draw in front of a group. In most cases it requires two people, one to draw and one to facilitate.

Lauritan and Hoejer (2003) have explored the analysis of drawings using an adapted form of Grounded Theory. They analysed drawings made by children from three different communities in Peru in order to understand the nature and state of development in each community from a child's perspective.

Grounded Theory consists of a set of procedures, which are commonly used in the analysis of field notes and interviews:

1. identifying the key images in the drawings,
2. generating categories or clusters of images,
3. for relationships between the images and
4. identifying core categories and relationships.

Their approach helped to understand the specific context of each community and also provided a conceptual framework for wider application in thinking through interventions with a community.

Risks and Pitfalls of Using Cartoons and Illustrations

It is clear that images can only be one of many creative resources to be used in community and organisational development work.

One of the main risks is the selection and use of images across cultures both internationally and generationally. What appeals to a group of young people might be totally inappropriate for an older age group. Cartoons are contextual, and failure to recognise this can mean a loss of message.

When using cartoons and illustrations in facilitation, it is important to be aware of the potential problem that what the artist hears which may not always be what the group is saying. Very easily, what

suddenly appears in an image form can seem to take on an authority, which the group might not have validated consciously.

Cartoons and illustrations are not everyone's preferred learning style or form of expression and some may feel threatened and overwhelmed by a facilitator who can draw way beyond their own abilities. They become fearful about drawing or even being asked to draw.

Conclusions

The framework presented illustrates that cartoons and illustrations can be used at a number of levels depending on the nature and purpose of the organisational capacity building intervention.

At the core of what cartoons and illustrations provide, is an alternative means of expression. This is a visual language which is:

1. **Memorable:** visual images appeal to the right side of the brain and we can retain visual images far better than words.
2. **Humorous:** providing fun and informality – the exaggerated lines and humour can bring an issue to life in a way that is palatable.
3. **Indirect:** the cartoon is a way of looking at an issue without having to confront it directly, which allows space to explore and reflect on the deeper and wider implications.
4. **Accessible:** to any size of group through the use of posters, Powerpoint, Internet
5. **Simple:** using fewer words – great opportunities to simplify difficult concepts.
6. **Enabling:** enhances participatory processes by enabling a group to discuss ideas without having to look at each other directly.

More work needs to be done on how this visual language can be used in organisational development processes, as well as exploring further the opportunities and potential of comic strips and their role in animated images in video, DVD and TV.

The pioneering work of Lauritan and Hoejer in analysis of drawing should be further explored as a tool for increasing the case for using cartoons and illustrations more widely in development practice.

To achieve an effective organisational capacity building process, reflective practice is vital, and I see the use of cartoons and illustrations as making some small positive contribution towards this.

Cartoons and illustrations and other arts represent a creative energy, which in many respects is being lost in the quest to over diagnose problems, quantify, reduce and analyse. There is a growing need for capacity building initiatives to rediscover a range of creative approaches as the basis for exploring solutions and as a way forward in the development sector.

Bill Crooks is an organisational and community development facilitator. He has used cartoons and illustrations for the last 20 years as a core tool for facilitating organisations, vulnerable groups and more recently in detached youth work in the UK.

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