Brief Report

Testing an Indigenous health resource: the participatory development process with *The Grog Book*

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Issue addressed

We describe a process for improving the accessibility and appropriateness of a book designed to stimulate Indigenous community action on alcohol problems.

Methods

Using a prototype version of the resource and a loosely structured research protocol, two researchers worked with 16 Aboriginal health and mental health workers in three locations.

Results

Participants' responses were analysed, providing research insights to improve aspects of language, structure and presentation, making them relevant and accessible to the target audience.

Conclusions

In contrast with the quantitative use of focus groups for preference testing materials with target audiences, this small-scale qualitative ethnographic methodology provided detailed and personalised commentary leading to practical improvements.

So what?

Working with potential users helped to ensure that the final version was appropriate to and accessible by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and health workers, whatever their literacy levels.

Key words

Aboriginal, health promotion, communication strategies.

Introduction

We report the process of developing a community action manual for the management of Indigenous alcohol problems, 'The Grog Book: Strengthening Indigenous Community Action on Alcohol'.[1] The book was written by one of us (MB) and designed by the other (MM) in a collaborative partnership. Our collaboration also included Aboriginal health workers and health professionals who worked with and commented on our prototype. Their responses helped us to improve the information and the ways we presented it, in terms of language, structure and visual format. It is this collaboration, and the processes used to elicit Aboriginal input, that we describe here.

The development process

The first stage in the design process was a structural and functional analysis of the manuscript to identify the purpose of each component of information – a prerequisite of determining the most appropriate form of visual presentation to make those functions readily accessible to the potential audience. We identified each 'voice' within the manuscript (i.e. author's voice in the main text; case studies in boxed text, etc). As the projected audience would include readers with both textual and visual literacy we developed different navigational aids to meet the full range of literacy needs. These included tabbed section dividers, contents pages for each section as well as at the beginning of the book, and the use of visual cues. We completed two sections of the resource, which we digitally printed and bound as a prototype with the full set of section dividers, contents pages and all illustrations.

The participatory process we used to pilot the manuscript – ethnographic diagnostic testing – is a form of user-testing in information design, initially developed by the Communication Research Institute of Australia to ensure that communication interfaces meet the needs of specific community and cultural groups.[2,3] This method has contributed to the production of award-winning documents and publications.[4] It involves informal, in-depth, one-on-one conversations with a small sample of potential users to expose the range of differences and perspectives in the information needs of the proposed audience.

Our research conversations use a loosely structured protocol that allows us to explore how potential users actually use the prototype. We discuss any problems the individual participants encounter with the prototype, emphasising that it is the document that is at fault, not them. Open-ended questioning allows participants to express their needs in their own words rather than – as in conventional market research surveys – being forced to select from a predetermined set of responses. It is their behaviour (not their preferences, however measured) that we need to know about in order to make practical improvements.

Diagnostic research as part of an iterative design development process is an efficient way of tailoring information materials to meet particular needs. It only requires a small sample of potential users, as patterns and polarisation in the way in which people use information emerge very quickly, allowing the researcher to see exactly how and why materials are not meeting needs. The ethnographic diagnostic research method allows us to probe more deeply than preference-based market research methods allow, and to generate practical options to improve the appropriateness of a particular resource for a particular audience.

The major aim in selecting participants was to ensure we had a spread of people from within the target audience, as choosing on the basis of difference maximises the data from a small sample. We worked with potential users in an urban (Canberra), rural (Goulburn), and a more remote setting (Alice Springs), with the support of the Djirruwang Centre, Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (a health service), an alcohol rehabilitation program, and the Living with Alcohol program. In all, we talked individually with 16 potential users.

Each research conversation lasted at least one hour. We gave the participant the prototype, and observed their initial response— the way they handled and looked through it. We then asked them to do a number of performance-based tasks, and asked them to "Speak all your thoughts out loud".

After noting initial responses we asked participants to look for particular bits of information, to test the efficiency of aspects of the design concept, as follows:

- **The ease of navigation around the book** – we observed whether they used textual navigation aids – the section tabs, list of contents – or the visual cues of images, or a combination of both.
- **The clarity of wording in section divider tabs** – whether these words successfully communicated the content of each section.
- **The accessibility of information in boxed text** – whether this attracted attention or whether people passed over text in boxes.
- **The efficiency and meaning of icon illustrations** (guiding readers to particular content) and effectiveness of other illustrations – whether they directed visually literate people to specific texts.

- **The way in which the stories were told** – whether the language was simple, clear and appropriate.
- **The effectiveness of the hierarchy of headings** – whether the headings were prominent enough and whether the main headings or subheadings were most efficient as navigational markers.

We asked a number of specific performance-based questions, for example: "Where would you turn to in the book if you wanted to find out whether Aboriginal people traditionally used alcohol?"

Questions were phrased neutrally. We elicited comments by asking "Do you have any strong feelings about the illustrations you have seen so far?", which allows the participant to interpret 'strong feelings' either positively or negatively. We recorded both what the participants said as they used the prototype and our observations of what they did (which are not always the same!). After completing all the performance-based tasks, participants were then asked if they had got mixed up about anything in the book, if there was anything we could change to make it better. We finished with an open-ended question: "Do you want to tell us anything else?"

Research findings

We found a clear differentiation of 'textually literate looker-uppers' from 'visually literate flippers'. Individuals with conventional reading skills preferred to use the section tabs, followed by the contents page, the page number, and then scanned headings and/or text to locate the requested information. Visually literate participants chose to flip and scan the pages for relevant illustrations: "The pictures tell you what's in the text … using them to see what's on the page really helps you understand".

It was clear that all the navigational aids we had introduced were going to be needed, although our testing showed that not all aids were used by all readers. The strategies people used were, not surprisingly, related to school-leaving age. The seven participants who used the written navigational aids such as contents pages and who scanned the subheadings and text had all continued in school beyond year 10. The 'flippers', who used the tabs and scanned the visual clues, had finished school earlier.

Much of the testing was focused around the devices we introduced for helping people to find their way to information relevant to their needs. The divider tabs were universally appreciated and effective to use: "I think things like this are wonderful. I can get a lot more out of a book if there's easy reference to it. It's much better than sitting down for half an hour trying to find your way through."

Many people found the illustrations extremely helpful aids to locating specific items of information: "When I see a picture it helps me to know something about what the text is. Pictures help to catch my eye. Without pictures it's too boring."

Social and cultural relevance

The research highlighted several incorrect assumptions we had made about use of language, appropriateness of illustrations and imagery in the icons. Participants suggested Aboriginal English and colloquial terms we could include, as well as a concluding paragraph for the book, which we incorporated. The response to the illustrations was overwhelmingly positive: "The characters look Aboriginal, but they don't. I like that. They are their own characters. Not trying too hard." We needed to keep a balance between positive illustrations (so as to maintain the level of motivation and avoid reinforcing despair), and explicit illustrations that showed the outcomes of excess alcohol consumption. Participants responded best to what we felt were the most hard-hitting illustrations such as brawling drunks and coffins. Contrary to our concerns that some of the illustrations might be too hard-hitting, they wanted us to show tougher images: "I like the fighting guys because that's what happens. The fight should show somebody already bleeding." "With neglect of children I'd hit that harsher."

Presentation of text

We wrote and designed the prototype so that the text was presented in bite-sized chunks, with many different types of information formatted in differentiated but consistent ways, in order to give less literate readers a 'licence to dip' into the book. Testing the prototype validated this open and varied presentation of text: "I like the way it's set out. You've got short paragraphs. There's no constant text from top to bottom."

Two of the performance-based searching tasks were designed to elicit a response to the highlighted and boxed texts. For the visually literate people these devices worked especially well: "Yes, I looked at that first. The colour attracted me to it. The boxed material just jumps out."

By contrast, the text-focused readers often bypassed the boxed texts. The testing also validated the use of simple colloquial language in the headings: "I think you've used good catch words. Ah! They are talking about what I know about."

Responses to open-ended questions at the end of our interviews were positive, but did identify the need for full colour throughout to attract and maintain attention (our prototype was economically produced in just two colours). We relied on the responses of participants to the full set of proposed illustrations to determine appropriate cover images, selecting those that struck participants in meaningful ways.

Conclusion

The qualitative methodology we have described is a one-to-one detailed exploration with a small sample audience. Because the testing process is interactive, participants do not feel that they are being subjected to a 'survey', which can be a disempowering experience. Most participants expressed their enjoyment of the process, both because the experience itself was interesting and (we believe) because their comments were treated as valued contributions to a useful process. Indeed, we made a considerable number of changes – some quite dramatic – based on the contributions made by these Aboriginal participants. The process involves participants intimately in the creation of the resource itself, as well as giving them a vested interest in its production. *The Grog Book* was a category winner of *The Australian* Awards for Excellence in Educational Publishing, 1999.

Acknowledgements

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