Colour & Emotion Manual

‘The power of colour has been used by great masters of the past and present to elicit many different feelings in people: to shock them, to overawe them and stimulate action, to help people think and make judgements, to delight them with subtle pleasures, to calm them or render them spellbound with subliminal visions.’

D.A. Pavey, Colour and Humanism, 2003

This manual is the outcome of an interdisciplinary and collaborative research project looking at colour, sensation and emotion, funded by a UCL Grand Challenges: Human Wellbeing award. It brought together artists, a human geographer, a speech and language therapist and a group of adults with acquired communication difficulties (aphasia) in a series of co-production workshops in January-March 2017. The workshops explored how we can use colour to create a visual language for expressing feelings and emotions. The Colour and Emotion Toolkit was co-designed out of the workshops, and five prototypes of the toolkit were produced. The manual provides instructions for using the complete toolkit, and can also be used independently. Each manual includes a Colour Diary and a number of coloured stickers. Additional colour diaries and toolkit materials can also be downloaded from the Slade Research pages (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/slade/research) and through the UCL BOOC – Academic Book of the Future.

The broader aim of the research was to think through how colour can be used to establish a nonverbal approach to measuring wellbeing creativity. Notwithstanding ongoing debate, wellbeing can be understood as how
people feel and how they function, on both a personal level and social level, and how they evaluate their whole life. Measuring wellbeing is becoming a central concern for public policy to assess social progress and outcomes for citizens. It also enables organisations to improve the design and delivery of programmes and services, especially in the contexts of social interventions and arts based programmes for health.

Typically, measures of wellbeing are developed as text based questionnaires or rating scales. These present a number of challenges for individuals with communication difficulties, cognitive impairments or learning difficulties, who may find it very demanding and difficult to complete often lengthy questionnaires. One response to these challenges has been to develop simplified versions of these questionnaires using cartoonlike images, or to rely on proxy responses, usually completed by a carer. These remain limited as they still rely on text or on someone else to complete them. Furthermore, such questionnaires relate to a cognitive assessment of wellbeing, rather than an expression based on the immediacy of feelings and sensation. The aim of the project was to create an accessible and sensation based tool using colour rather than questions.

The starting point of the project was to explore the potential of creating individual visual languages that can be used to express emotions, rather than aim towards a universal language based on colour. There have been a number of studies on the effects that colour has on mood and energy. For instance, in Western culture red is typically associated with love and green has connotation of jealousy, while yellow is associated with happiness, and in contrast black and shades of grey have negative connotations. Yet despite common tropes, different shades of the same colour can have completely different connotations when people are asked to relate their mood to a colour. As early as the 19th Century the poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe described the mutable nature of colours, and speaking of blue he described:

“This colour has a peculiar and almost indescribable effect on the eye. As a hue it is powerful - but it is on the negative side, and in its highest purity is, as it were, a stimulating negation. Its appearance, then, is a kind of contradiction between excitement and repose” (Theory of Colour, 1810).

In this way, we perceive and feel colour differently. This became very clear through the co-production workshops.

The artist Joseph Albers, best known for his work on The Interaction of Color (1963), further describes how the same colour can evoke

---

1 Based on the Office of National Statistics definition of wellbeing, 2013.
2 Nonverbal questionnaires for adults with aphasia include the Visual Analogue Self-Esteem Scale by Brumfitt & Sheeran (1999) and the Aphasia Impact Questionnaire by Swinburn (2015)
innumerable meanings, and that these meanings can change as colours interact when they are placed together or next to each other. In thinking about a visual language for emotions, we also sought to explore how colours interact, in the same way that individual words do when making meaning in sentences, to enable the description of emotional states, how we feel, in more nuanced and complex ways.

Our second starting point was to reconsider some of the words we use when we talk about wellbeing. Wellbeing words can at times be very abstract and difficult to understand, especially for a person with acquired communication difficulties such as aphasia. We took the wellbeing words from an standardised wellbeing scale, the Positive Affect Negative Affect Scale and developed a series of more concrete but less specifically emotional words:

Happy - Sad - Soft - Sharp - Big - Small - New - Old - Share - Hide - High - Low

These concrete words are the starting point to thinking about emotion through colour.

Finally, the toolkit we produced includes a number of different materials, including stickers, felt and magnets, to explore sensation in relation to touch, as well as offering flexible and accessible materials that can be reused.

There are three parts to the manual:

Part I of the manual contains two exercises to start the process of thinking about colour and emotion.

Part II describes how to use the Colour Mat as a communication tool for expressing emotion in a one-to-one setting.

Part III describes how to use the Colour Diary to record feelings in the moment, and over a period of time.

Each toolkit contains:
2. Colour Diary with coloured sticker sheets
3. Expression Board (x 3) and word packs (x 2)
4. Colour Mat (felt x 2) with varied coloured felt shapes
5. Colour Mat (magnet x 1) with varied coloured magnet shapes

Part I
Thinking Colour & Emotion

The following exercises are done in a pair.

One person facilitates and guides the other person through the instructions.
Exercise I

PURPOSE OF EXERCISE. To begin the use of colour to express emotion.

SUGGESTIONS FOR EXERCISE

Prepare a large selection of square coloured stickers.
Take the expression board and the word pack.
Taking each of the following words in turn, let the person choose one colour per word.
Let them take their time.
Place each word on the board, and stick the chosen colour in the window.
Repeat for each word.
The board shows your colour language.

This exercise is the starting point to thinking about the links between colour, sensation and emotion. It is based on free associations, and aims to open up new conversations about feelings in response to words. The colour language might change over time. This exercise can be repeated at any time and can also be explored with the felt or magnet Colour Mats from the toolkit.

Exercise II

PURPOSE OF EXERCISE: To use different shapes and sizes to express the intensity of emotion.

SUGGESTIONS FOR EXERCISE

Prepare a selection of coloured stickers with different shapes and sizes
Use the back of the expression board from Exercise I.
Taking one word at a time, let the person choose different shapes and sizes to express each word.
Let them take their time.
Repeat for each word.

This exercise is about making associations between shapes and size, words and the intensity of feeling: How happy? How small? It can include different colour combinations. The exercise aims to open up further conversations about different feelings. It adds a second dimension to the visual language.
Part II
Colour Mat

The Colour Mat is used to express how a person feels in the moment.

It is completed at as a pair; for example in a speech and language therapy session, or at home with a family member.

GENERAL DIRECTIONS
Prepare a selection of coloured felt or magnets of different shapes and sizes.

Take a Colour Mat (felt or magnet).

Use the coloured felt or magnet shapes to describe how you feel at this moment.

Use as many colours and shapes as you feel.

The Colour Mat uses flexible and reusable materials. It can be used to produce a snapshot of how a person is feeling in that moment and can be recorded by photography.
Part III
Colour Diary

The Colour Diary is used to reflect how a person feels over a longer time period. It is completed at home.

The diary can be used as a one-a-day diary for two weeks.
Or it can be used once a week over 12 weeks.

GENERAL DIRECTIONS

On each page is a blank space.

Use the stickers to describe how you feel at this moment.

Use as many colours and shapes as you feel.

Write the date and the time.

At the beginning of the diary are some words.
You can use these to think about how you feel.

The diary captures changes over time, and may be used as a tool for measuring wellbeing creatively. It is unique to each person and is best used as an individual measure of change. As a creative method it is best used as a means of communication, whether directly, nonverbally, or through the discussion it facilitates, rather than as a representational text or scientific scale.
Research Reflections

Dr Nuala Morse (PI), Honorary Researcher, UCL Culture

Colour exists on a palette, a spectrum of shades, tone, graduation and affect. Emotions can also have different shades: we feel with more or less intensity, more or less brightness, or softness, or darkness. Through this project we have worked with people who experience communication difficulties to explore how colour can become a visual language for emotion. The manual and accompanying toolkit we have produced provide a way into thinking emotion through colour, and two tools to capture and record feelings: the Colour Diary and the Colour Mat. They provide a different way for ‘talking’ about how we feel, and are a starting point for measuring wellbeing creatively.

Jo Volley (Co-I), Deputy Director (Projects) & Co-director, Materials Research Project, Slade School of Fine Art, UCL

George Field’s Chromatography, or A Treatise on Colours and Pigments and Their Powers in Painting, 1835, states that colour; improves the disposition and morals of people – and whatever improves the morals, promotes happiness of man, individual and social. Each chapter on a colour is introduced and interspersed with a work of poetry or text extolling the beauty or virtue of colour as a necessary and immediate way in which we experience the world.

So here we are not bound by prescriptive ideas of colour theory. Here we are interested in our colour response, our sensations, in relation to time, touch, sound as well as sight. This manual is not another colour theory – or maybe it will be a new theory of colour.

Nir Segal (Artist researcher), PhD Candidate, Slade School of Fine Art, UCL

I have arrived at this research project with my background as a painter and my current interest in collaboration, facilitation and shared authorship. The research was conducted collaboratively with people with aphasia, focused on how colour and sensation can be employed individually as means of expression. We assumed that focusing on participants’ choices would increase the integrity of how these choices are then being interpreted and measured. We led this project with the sense that measuring well-being visually could not work without the participants establishing their own individual way of expressing. Once this was established it enabled a line of communication with which the visual elements became an instrument for sharing participants’ well-being. In the process, we tried to expand the notion of ‘measuring’ into a notion of ‘experience’ where participants take ownership on their visual language. This has meant that we were working towards a kit that would allow self-expression, creativity and sense of authorship on how each individual feels.
Dr Michael Dean, Senior Teaching Fellow, UCL Communication Clinic, Dept Language and Cognition.

We look for activities and materials that are ‘accessible’ to people with communication difficulties, allowing them to get their ideas across and demonstrate their competence. The Colour Diary developed in the workshops is an additional tool for doing this. Discussing feelings is a real challenge, language-wise. Although creating an image with colours and shapes makes no immediate demands on the person’s language skills, I found that the workshop participants wanted to explain their choices (perhaps being puzzled by them themselves), and so did use language, but in ways that would not have been possible without the support of the materials.

We are extremely grateful to all the participants who took part in the coproduction workshops and assisted in the development of the toolkit. We would also like to thank Azimut Print for their support with additional materials. Likewise, iDM Design Ltd who produced the bespoke stickers and gave generously to the project.

This project and publication were supported by a UCL Grand Challenges: Human Wellbeing Award.

Colour & Emotion: An exhibition
UCLH Arts Street Gallery
UCLH Arts and Heritage
14th January – 21st February 2018.

Authors:
Dr Nuala Morse (PI), Honorary Researcher, UCL Culture
Jo Volley (Co-I), Deputy Director (Projects) & Co-director, Materials Research Project, Slade School of Fine Art, UCL
Nir Segal (Artist researcher), PhD Candidate, Slade School of Fine Art, UCL
Dr Michael Dean, Senior Teaching Fellow, Language and Cognition, UCL

Design (Colour & Emotion Manual and Colour Diary): Lesley Sharpe
Production Assistant: Malgorzata Bany

Printed by Mixam
Published by Slade Press