A field guide to

Public Policy Collage

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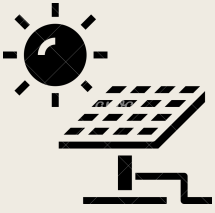
Feelings such as hope, empathy, fear, grief, rage and despair, arise at the intersection of politics and everyday life constantly. Yet these emotions are rarely part of how we experience policy discourse, which is often dominated by bureaucratic and abstract language.



To be sure, facts, figures, arguments and analysis are necessary, but they are not able to grasp the dimensions of human emotions that arise when converging societal crises unfold.

Introduction

Social crisis and transformation require a public policy discourse that is engaging and participatory. Honest and heartfelt. Accessible and compelling. A discourse that is able to accommodate the beauty, pain and potential of our personal and collective human experience. As Artist Olafur Eliasson affirms, "Facts are one part; just as guilt does not inspire initiative, people will not act on facts alone. We are inspired to act by emotional and physical experience" (Rosing & Eliasson, 2015).

Using collage as an arts-based research method, I have observed how the meaning-making power of creating art can break down the barriers created by formal policy language. By choosing images and words, cutting them out, gluing them together — participants become both witness and author of their own political hopes and desires, fears and frustrations. Busy hands and creative activity soften the often-intimidating or confrontational discussions that political issues can elicit.

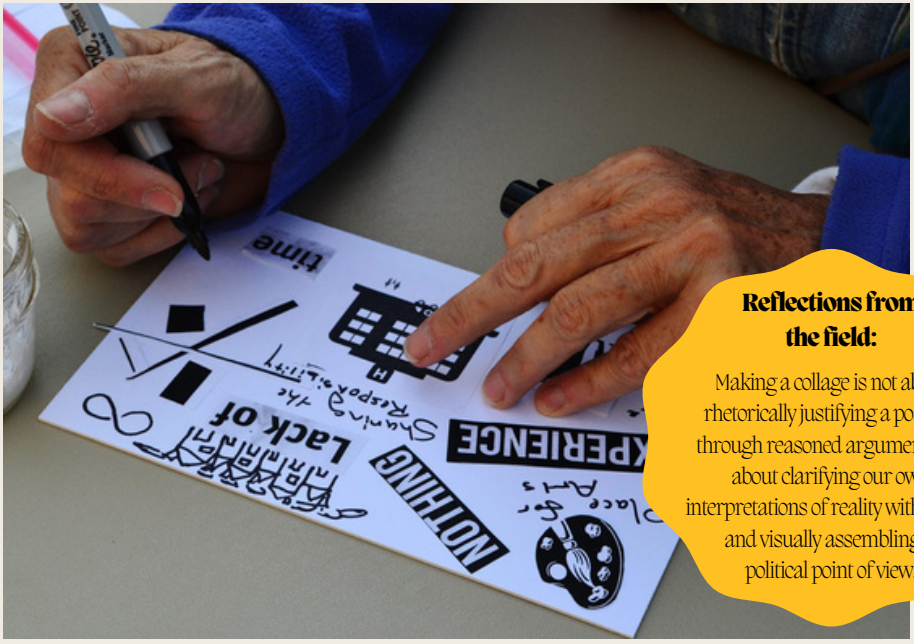
What brought me here?

I come to this work as a community researcher, media practitioner and organizer working on the unceded traditional territories of the xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səl̓ílwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations (Vancouver, British Columbia). Since starting a creative agency focused on civic engagement, (Gen Why Media) in 2011 I have been motivated to design creative approaches to political participation.

My interest in public policy collage began through a field study, *Creative Publics: Art-Making Inspired by the Federal Election*, that I undertook in the first year of my Doctoral program. I designed this field study as part of the national research project *Art for Social Change: An Integrated Research Program in Teaching Evaluation, and Capacity Building,* with the aim of investigating how media, art and cultural production might generate political discourse and affective agency.

The study consisted of four interventions that I orchestrated across different public sites in 2015. The purpose of the project was to inquire into how public collaging could serve as a space for low-tech, in-person political engagement where participants could publicly express themselves through affect as well as dialogue.

Through this project, I witnessed revealing, emotional and intimate discussions about how public policies impact everyday life. I have heard heart-felt descriptions among participants who told each other what the collages represented—their young families and aging parents, their dwindling incomes and painful addictions, their projected fears and plans for the future. I have seen how strangers open up to each other, quickly and deeply, in ways that are rarely available in conventional policy discourse.



Reflections from the field:

Making a collage is not about rhetorically justifying a position through reasoned argument. It is about clarifying our own interpretations of reality with others and visually assembling a political point of view.

What is public policy collage?

Public Policy Collage (PPC) is an arts-based research method focused on public policy issues. Participants are given collaging tools (scissors, glue, card stock), icons representing different issues associated with everyday life (food, shelter, health, education, etc.) and asked to make a collage in response to a research question which is determined collaboratively between the research(s) and the participants.

PPC can be used as a synthesizing tool by allowing for juxtaposition and integration of multiple experiences and ideas (Butler-Kisber, 2010). The process allows for disparate languages and policy visions to be held together, and surface the gaps or dissonances between them.

Intended to be used in community-engaged research, PPC merges conventional research methods (surveys, interviews, etc.) with collage-making to allow for deeper insight, interpretation, meaning making, creative expression, and alternative ways of knowing (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014).

What is public policy collage?

PPC allows for meaning-making processes that challenge conventional interpretations of public policy. Using metaphor, symbolism, and interpretive communication, participants can move beyond binary thought patterns and language. Intuitively selecting, sorting, connecting, and arranging images link daily life to policy decisions in ways that can spark reflection and critique – revealing the unknown and critically questioning the already known (Yuen, 2016).

For this reason, PPC can be potentially empowering and even therapeutic, in that participants may feel that their perspective is validated, their wisdom is appreciated and their self-expression valued (Gerstenblatt, 2013; Chilton & Scotti, 2014).

The physical act of PPC provides a space and a process for which participants can connect to one another outside the constraints of conventional policy discourse.

PPC, therefore, functions in two ways simultaneously: 1) It provides an open format for personal-political expression, critique and synthesis; 2) It provides a flexible structure for political dialogue. This double-function enables participants to tell their personal stories in such a way that they intersect with broader political issues and spark exchanges with others. As researcher Felice Yuen (2016) describes:

"Collage elicits a sensory response that enables the person creating the collage and viewers to respond concretely and emotionally. Such a response sets the foundation for engaging with others and inspiring social change".

Collage as art-based research method

Arts-based research (ABR) has developed over the past few decades alongside the calls for researchers to engage in reflexivity and to decolonize the process by which we acquire knowledge (Lather, 1991; Smith, 1999; Capous-Desyllas & Morgaine, 2018). Collage does this by privileging 'everyday knowledge' and by placing emphasis on the researcher and the researched sharing their knowledge as equals (Swantz, 2008).

Collage-making is used as an entry point into policy discussions between participants and the researchers, allowing both to express thoughts and feelings that might not otherwise have been articulated using conventional research methods. Compared to other arts-based approaches, such as drawing or painting, collage can serve as a less demanding and intimidating method because the artwork does not need to be rendered from scratch and most people can cut and glue images together.

Reflections from the field:

I witnessed how making a collage can hold space for care and moments of testimony. It is a form of public truth-telling that reveals the lived experience and emotional implications behind policy decisions.

Therefore, with fairly rudimentary skills, participants using collage can relay unconscious or semi-conscious experiences that can be challenging or impossible to convey verbally (Butler-Kisber, 2008). However, Scotti and Chilton (2017) remind us that collage is not something that "anyone can do" or a technique in which "anything goes." The challenge for researchers who use collage as data analysis and representation is ensuring that it carries "aesthetic power".

Aesthetic power is an evocative, provocative, and stimulating power that has a potential to connect with others (Barone & Eisner, 2011; Chilton & Leavy, 2014). Part of achieving this means helping participants make work that is evocative and empowering. This is where it is crucially important to work with an artist-facilitator who is able to help participants articulate ideas visually and make a coherent work of art.

Why use public policy collage for research?

PPC invites participants to play a significant role in all aspects of the research, including research question formulation, data analysis and knowledge mobilization (Van Vlaenderen, 2004; Yuen, 2016). Through symbolism and dialogue, PPC is a simple activity that can facilitate cross-cultural understandings and bridge communication gaps between community members, researchers and policy-makers.

As a method of arts-based action research, public policy collage can help:

- Incorporate the views of a wider range of community members (i.e. seniors, youth, women, people with disabilities and so forth) in policy research/development projects.
- Link the personal to the political by drawing connections between everyday life and historical, environmental and social contexts.
- Create new ways to compare data, animate research processes and communicate findings.
- Express a need, document a reality or develop policy recommendations .

Reflections from the field:

The unhurried atmosphere and the slow act of collage-making created a space where conversations could be gradual, allowing for long silences between exchanges as people worked on their art.

- Depict emotions, events, perceptions and identities that may not emerge during interviews, surveys or focus groups.
- Yield different kinds of data that can create new possibilities for researchers to see, hear and feel.
- Bridge communication and power gaps between residents, researchers and policy-makers.
- Provide a venue for participants to talk about their own experiences, as well as how they feel about the experiences of others.
- Facilitate cross-cultural understandings; and strengthen community networks. (Mahoney, et.al., 2021).

6 STEPS FOR PUBLIC POLICY COLLAGE

These steps are not prescriptions about how public policy collage "must" be implemented. On the contrary, they are intended to serve as inspiration to modify or create your own designs that best match your particular research objectives.

Step 1

Determine whether PPC is a suitable method. Determine the goals of your research and whether this method is suitable for the type of research you wish to conduct. Consider how you will centre the community you are working with as the main benefactor of research outcomes (e.g. communication, advocacy, and knowledge mobilization). A key question to ask is: Will this method help advance the goals of the community I am working with? If so, how?

Step 2

Identify research collaborators and community partners. Consider whether the researcher(s) have connection and accountability to the community they are working with. Partners could include individual community members, groups or organizations such as academic institutions, non-profit organizations, policymakers (e.g., health authorities, government, etc.), industry, grassroots partners and others. Don't forget to consider the power dynamics (class, race, gender, ability, sexual orientation, age, etc.) at play and whose voices might still be missing.

Step 3

Formulate the research question with your collaborators and/or participants. Determine the research question(s) you would like to answer with the PPC method and how the analysis will unfold. Collaborators/research participants should be actively involved in the research process, including question formulation, data gathering, analysis and dissemination. Discuss whether you have interests beyond data analysis (organizing, advocacy, etc.) and how/if these elements can work together

Step 4

Facilitate the collage making process. See Appendix.

Step 5

Analyze the data. Consider how you will involve the community in data analysis. Consider how the analysis will address your research question and/or complement other research methods. For more information on how to conduct collage analysis see the References section.

Step 6

Develop a plan for communicating findings. This step should be planned prior to starting the project to avoid conflicts too late in the process. Consider the story you want to tell, your audience and how the public will encounter your research. What findings will you share? Whose story will you highlight? Who will you show the findings to and how will you show them? Who are you trying to influence? What will get their attention? If you are trying to influence decision-making, consider developing a theory of change to determine how you will engage community members, elected officials, decision makers, the media, etc.

Key considerations

Transparency

Clearly state the rationale for the use of collage and conduct a transparent process for planning the data analysis, conceptualization or dissemination phases.

Prototype

Consider testing the method before facilitating a group process to develop familiarity with the techniques to be able to effectively introduce it to research participants or use it to disseminate findings.

Knowledge mobilization

Considering knowledge dissemination and impact means thinking through how research outcomes lead to advocacy, impact, poli- cy changes, active

Community benefit

What are the potential benefits of the research to the community you are working with and do they align with the community's needs?

Ethics

Consider issues of consent, risk of harm, cultural safety, copyright, accreditation, confidentiality, and data ownership.

Key Considerations

Aesthetic power

Work with a professional artist-facilitator so that the collages have "aesthetic power": an evocative, provocative, and stimulating power that has a potential to connect with the audience. Key factors to consider are: What images are offered? Do participants have a wide choice of content? Are images of people of different cultures, genders, and age groups represented? Do the images include people, things, animals, natural scenes, cityscapes, abstract forms, and so forth? Are the images visually diverse, depicting a wide range of colors, textures, and design elements? If there is a specific topic, are there images available that might represent it? (Barone & Eisner, 2011; Chilton & Leavy, 2014; Scotti & Chilton, 2017).

Accessibility and hospitality:

Work with an artist-facilitator who can help participants feel comfortable with the process and help participants articulate ideas visually. Consider barriers to participation and how to alleviate them. Is there compensation for the research participants? Support for necessary travel or food for participants? Is the space suitable for making artwork, and is there adequate lighting, comfortable seating, and a place to discard unwanted scraps? Can images or material be laid out on a table, or are they presented in a stack that must be flipped through? Time and privacy are two other considerations that can enable or inhibit participants' creativity.

Process Guide

Time: 15-90 minutes
Group size: 2-5 people (could be multiple groups)
Complexity: Easy

Steps:

- Create a welcoming environment with food, music, and comfortable seating.
- Explain the goals of the project. Give parameters about how much time people have, how many collage they can make, material they can use, etc.
- Provide participants with collaging tools (a 4X6 piece of durable cardstock, scissors, glue, markers) and visual materials that include icons representing public policy themes (eg: democratic reform, education, health care, human rights, national security) and news headlines cut out from newspapers and magazines. Consider pre-selecting and organizing images ahead of time if time is an issue.
- Once participants are ready to make a collage, give them a prompt question to respond to with their collage. Formulate 1-2 prompt questions ahead of time.
- Encourage participants to re-write headlines, re-mix icons and draw their own images as they reflect their views or concerns.
- Following the collage-making process, ask participants to verbally reflect on their collages through open-ended, broad questions such as "What would you like to say about your collage?" or engage in a more in-depth semi-structured interview, asking the participants to verbally reflect on and articulate their insights that arose from the collage images.

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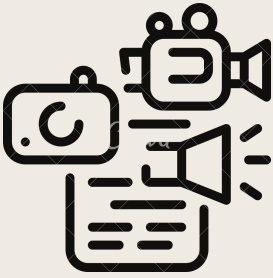
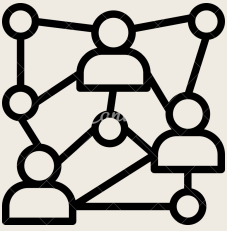
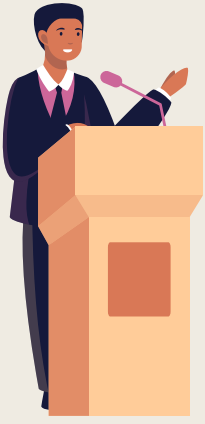
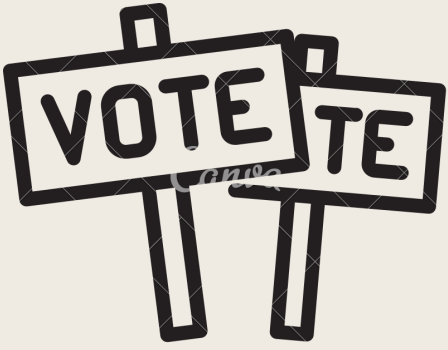
Democracy

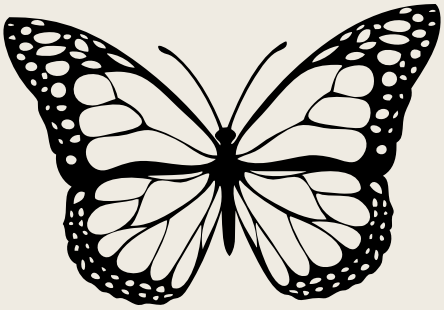


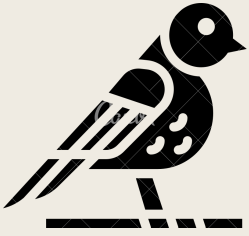


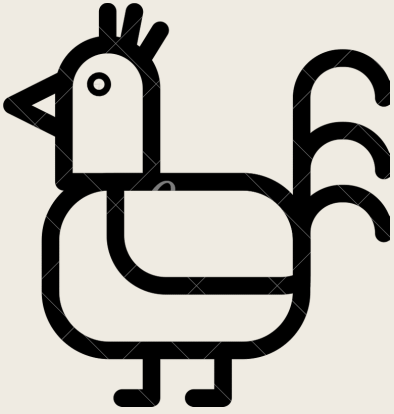


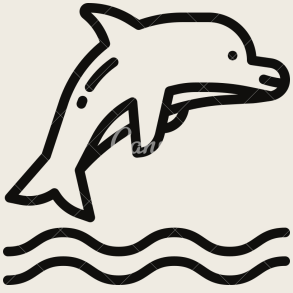


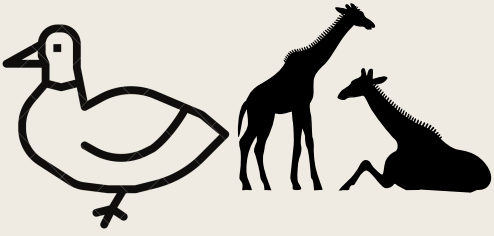
Environment

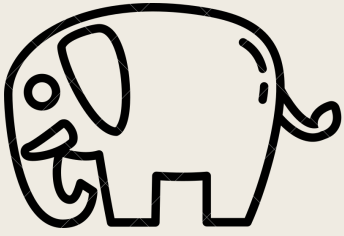


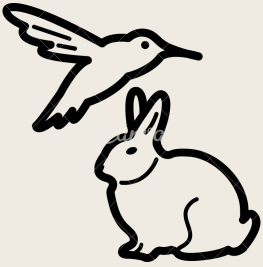




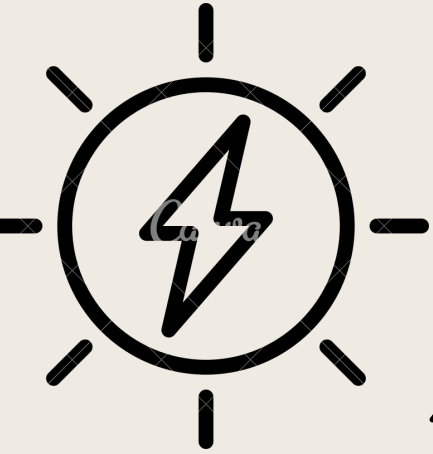


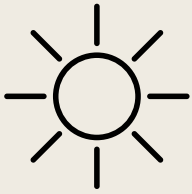


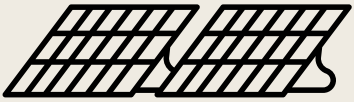


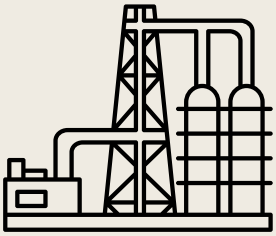


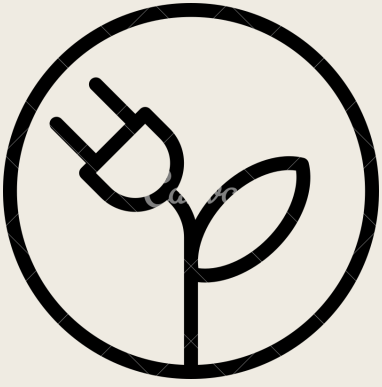
Energy

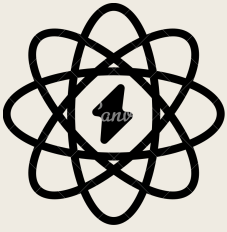


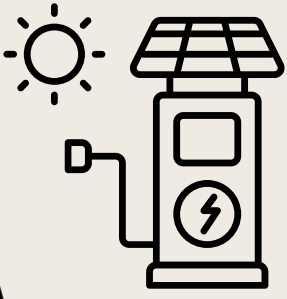


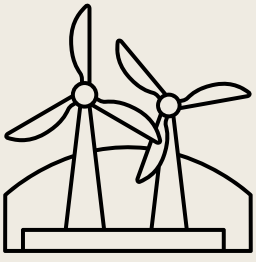


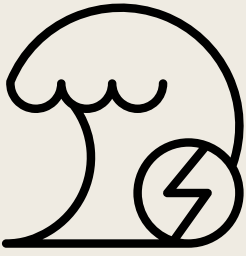




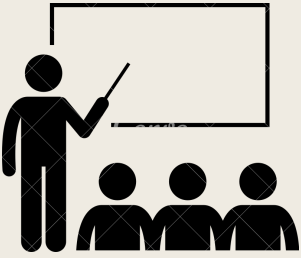


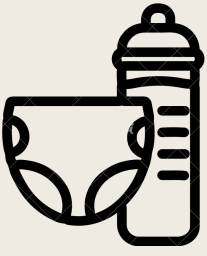






Social issues

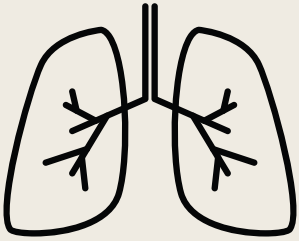


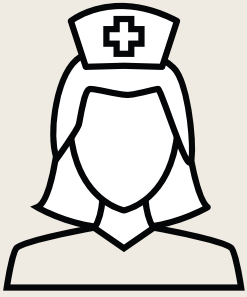


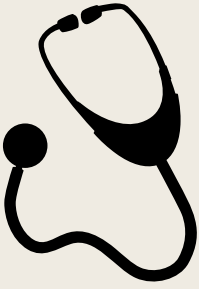
Human Rights

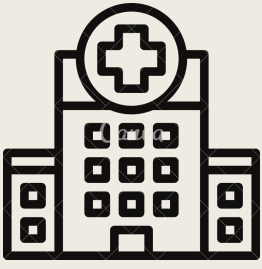
Economy

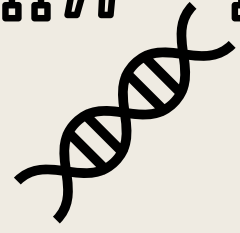
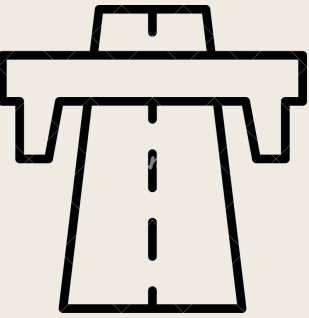
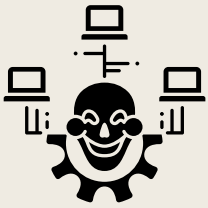
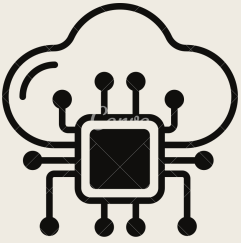
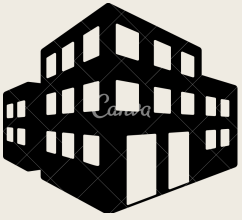
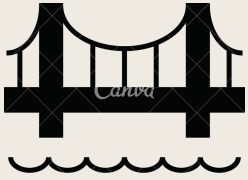
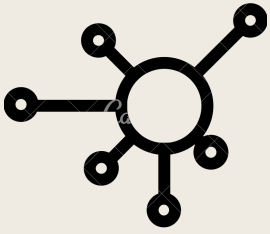
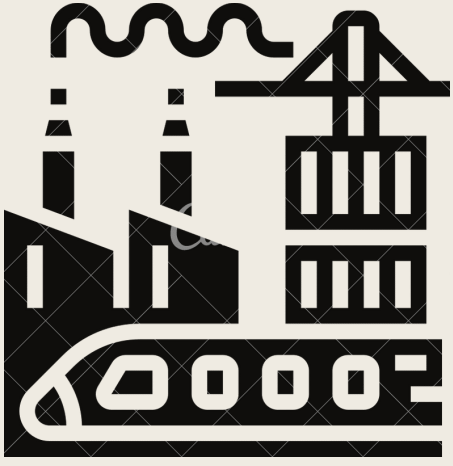
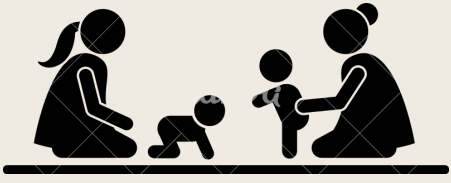
Health











Infrastructure