

Description:

Symbols can be used in research and evaluation to provide a stimulus that encourages people to react to or talk about different choices they make. Symbols can be used in both suggestive and subjective ways. They offer participants a starting point, but also allow for personal interpretation in order to be even more informative.

Examples of using symbols in a suggestive way include using emojis or weather symbols to represent different moods and different senses of well-being, or using an open symbol like a speech bubble to encourage people to write a response. The 'blob' tree is a patented cartoon representation of several characters (without gender or age) on or around a tree which can be used to represent a particular setting. This tool can be used to encourage people to reflect, by selecting the characters that best represent how they currently feel.

Another example of using symbols in a subjective way includes asking participants to create their own symbols in response to a question. For example, you could ask participants to create their own symbol for the most important thing they gained from an activity.

Application:

Using symbols is useful when evaluating work with younger children. Tools such as the Blob Tree are designed to help to explore emotional reactions to a topic and are useful when you are aiming to help students engage in conversations about their feelings.

Type of evidence:

Qualitative. OfS Type I (Narrative)

Strengths:

Symbols tend to be accessible and unintimidating, encouraging participation from a wide range of groups including young children and those with language barriers. For example, the 'blob tree' can be integrated into an intervention, for example, as an ice-breaker.

The creativity in the personal interpretation of the symbols can allow for rich insights into participants' perspectives on a topic.

Using symbols as part of tools, such as the Blob Tree, can help students to articulate their feelings in a safe way and can potentially support their personal development by helping children to express their feelings. Research has shown that the Blob Tree is effective in examining feelings linked to behaviour.

Symbols and Blob Tree entries can be collated at the beginning of a session and end of a session to capture changes in how participants are feeling.

Weaknesses:

Tools such as the Blob Tree can be viewed in many different ways, as they show a variety of feelings and there is no right or wrong interpretation of the blobs. They are useful to start a discussion by asking students which blob they relate to, but the outcomes tend to be individualistic. Because there is an element of subjectivity and personal interpretation involved, the results can be difficult to generalise.

Mixed methods:

The blob tree can combine well with a range of other methods including intervention evaluation.

Expertise:

Low-Medium

Requirements:

Symbols can be used cheaply and easily and no specialist expertise is needed, although creativity and empathy is needed, as well as skills in dealing with qualitative evidence.

The Blob Tree tool is free to download – and different versions are available for different settings. The Blob Tree does offer online and in person training sessions which can maximise its use as a communication tool.

Ethical considerations:

Where symbols are used as a basis for discussion, the process can draw on the principles of research ethics for qualitative study interviews, where participants give informed consent and are assured about confidentiality and data protection and data management. This type of approach to researching people's perspectives also raises special considerations regarding power dynamics and contextual relevance, and there are challenges in terms of ethical reporting which is individualistic and context specific. Analysis and use of qualitative and narrative data to make inferences can be problematic – since even when

researchers believe there are shared normative principles, these cannot be allocated in a decontextualized manner.

Work planning:

The preparation needed depends on the approach you are taking. It could involve:

- Agreeing a survey format using symbols. Make sure the symbols are already in common currency or you have tested them with a pilot group to ensure that they are interpreted similarly by different people. In the case of a survey, the analysis could be done quantitatively using descriptive statistics.
- Agreeing an image such as a Blob Tree and managing the delivery of this to participants. You will need to give them clear instructions and make sure they understand how you will use their information. In this case analysis could involve comparing the patterns and narratives collected with a group at the start of an activity with those at the end.
- Managing and administering materials and resources for your participants, if you are asking them to create their own symbols. In this case, the analysis stage could involve using the images to tell a story of the themes that were surfaced.

Analysis:

Symbols and Blob Tree entries can be collated at the beginning of a session and end of a session to capture changes in how participants are feeling.

When used as a basis for discussion, it may take time to unpick the interpretations with individual students, so implementing the approach in groups is time-consuming.

The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis (Flick, 2014) describes different methods of analysis - doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446282243>

Reporting:

Findings from research using symbols, such as the Blob Tree, can be used in a variety of ways with the Praxis Team and can be useful in formal reports and presentations to describe the process of engagement with the participants and associated findings.

The Blob Tree was used with Key Stage 2 learners to reflect on a collaborative STEM programme involving several partner schools. The activity was used as part of a piece of collaborative work to discuss the way participants interacted with and supported each other as a learning community.

At the start of the session, the activity involved handing out a photocopy of the Blob Tree worksheet to each participant and giving them time to look at the image and make their own interpretation about each character's feelings. The facilitator explained that the activity is a chance to record how they are feeling about working with another class, and the question 'How do you feel about us all working together?'. The participants were asked to colour in the blob character they most identified with. They were then invited to share in groups of 3-4 to discuss their reasons for selecting a character, and to think about how the different blob characters might treat each other. Staff and student ambassadors worked with the groups, and had been briefed to help learners if any sensitive issues arose.

At the end of the session, learners used the same blob tree, or a new blank version if they chose to. The choices were analysed to see how feelings and their sense of community and cohesion had changed. Results included:

- At the beginning of the session, 21 participants chose characters that stand confidently and happily, and this increased to 38 at the end of the session.
- 14 chose characters that are cooperating with others or in groups at the beginning, compared to 23 at the end of the session.
- Upset or isolated characters were chosen by 7 children at the beginning of the session and 5 at the end of a session.

The participants seemed to enjoy the activity and there were some interesting discussions. For example, participants spoke about examples of attitudes and behaviours that they thought are both positive or negative for team working. The participants identified characters who they felt were in a position to help others. This led to discussion of the importance of role models and how people's attitudes and behaviours can support a learning community.



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