Autoethnography through Comics-Making

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Abstract

This article focuses on the work of a university professor who has been making comics with students for thirteen years of educational practice. The work is positioned within a theoretical background, focused on multimodality and unified approach of using words and pictures to work with students, from K-8 to university students. The narrative journey that foregrounds this article has been explored elsewhere, and so the central focus of this piece is the unfolding process of using autoethnography in visual and verbal, as well as a commentary of the unique affordances of both autoethnography and the comics medium.

Key words: comics, autoethnography, visual texts, pedagogy, qualitative research

Autoethnography through Comics-Making

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the creation of a collaborative online literacy group through Zoom offered unexpected challenges and opportunities to engage with K-8 students in a digital classroom centered on experiences with a variety of texts, including graphic novels and comic books. This virtual space and the linguistic practices explored within have been the subject of a separate publication (DeHart, 2022). This article focuses on the affordances of autoethnographic methods for teaching inquiry, and explores how these methods align with comics reading and making.

In many ways, this work was the continuation of ideas and teaching strategies that had been implemented in a graduate assessment course in the early spring semester, centered around the use of graphic novels as texts for engagement and success-building with older readers who are striving. Harvey and Ward's (2017) description of striving and thriving conditions of literacy development, as well as their focus on a range of texts for building instructional support, formed a foundation for this initial work, alongside the semiotic nature of comics referenced by scholars like Neil Cohen (2005) and Barbara Postema (2013). Notably in the context of this consideration, graphic novels provided a personal journey through my experience reading in school as a fixture within a range of media engagements and practices centering around popular superhero characters.

What the instructors, including myself, found in the online literacy space necessitated by the pandemic was an opportunity, amid emotional difficulty, to include a wide audience of school-age children, regardless of geographic region, and the additional affordance of a classroom community composed of graduate students, undergraduate students, university professors, and in-service teachers.

Theoretical Framework

Multimodality is a prominent theory that has guided this work, drawing from Kress's (2005) description of the roles of modes (image, gesture, and others) in meaning-making, as well as the affordances some texts carry for disseminating messages/content through multiple modes. These affordances are an ontological extension of the text's design, woven into the nature of the form. In this case, comics serve as one text that conveys meaning and operates with a particular design, while the virtual platform of delivery allowed for additional affordances in digital design, including the online chat feature and screen-sharing/annotating capability.

Intentional focus on the meaning-making aspects of visual literature, including comics, has been foundational in thinking about how to compose for and with students in physical spaces (Sousanis, 2015), including exposure to mentor texts and steps in design/composition. Additionally, the invitational nature of drawing as a textual practice has been helpful in framing the work I have done with students, from early elementary grades to those in the university setting. Jacobs (2014) has noted the potential for engaging readers and writing by embracing modes of creating that are valued outside of traditional school structures and sometimes aligned more closely with home-based practices. Jacobs (2014) went on to point to the choices in design that students make when they are creating across multiple modes. These designs, made available within the ontological fabric of the text, can then be taken up to construct meaning.

The Affordances of Comics in Storytelling

The multimodal nature of comics is central to this inquiry. As Bowman and Monnin (2013) have pointed out, the grammar of graphic novels is both unique and teachable. Sousanis (2015) invites students to explore the comics medium through a comics-making process, noting that an expertise in comics is not a prerequisite to engaging with comics storytelling, and Barry

(2020) pointed to a variety of ways to fashion comics narrative, including collage and range of

tools. In terms of popular media and texts, Pilkey (2020) has also pointed to the many ways that

comics can be made, and the ways that young children can explore them. In the book *Cat Kid*

Comic Club, Pilkey (2020) uses forms that range from simple illustrations mirroring pencil on

notebook paper to more complex stories with sculpted toys. Despite writing for different

audiences, Barry and Pilkey both share work that disrupts the notion that comics are composed

by a singular method.

Hart (2018) has written about the ubiquity of story, as well as the affordances of the

comics medium to share stories through words and images. According to Hart (2018), comics are

another text/medium in a long line of authoring that stems from ancient glyphs, allowing for

(re)presentations of both true and embellished events. This centrality of the story is in

epistemological alignment with the goals of autoethnography.

Experiences have been captured in a range of disciplines and directions through visual

autoethnography, including tourism (Scarles, 2010), explorations of childhood memories

(Ownby, 2013), arts education (Eldridge, 2012), and the experience of young queer people (Meer

& Müller, 2021). Sometimes the alignment of the graphic novel medium with autoethnographic

processes is central to the study, as was the case with Meer and Müller's collaborative arts-based

work (2021). In this case, the use of visual medium was central to the work as both a method and

an end product. In some cases, comics-making is one of many analytical methods, as was the

case in Weaver-Hightower's (2018) autoethnographic account of the loss of a child. From a

wider lens, Herrmann (2013) wrote of the nature of the autoethnographic project as a means of

delving into the implications of popular culture. A number of scholars rightly position comics as

cultural artifacts (Cohen, 2005; Flowers, 2017; Jenkins, 2020; Whitlock, 2006), which can then

be drawn upon as textual points for weaving an autoethnographic account (Hughes &

Pennington, 2016).

Lastly, Campbell Gallman (2021) explored and explained the steps in utilizing comics art

to examine qualitative research in a comics chapter format. In a visual and verbal figure

representing surprise, Campbell Gallman (2021) related: "WHAAAAT?! Are you telling me I

can writing comics to analyze my data?!?" (p. 393). According to this researcher, such work is

heuristic and "allows the author to EXPLORE feelings, data, themes and ideas in linear and

nonlinear ways" (Campbell Gallman, 2021, p. 396).

Why Autoethnography? Exploring Fandom

My journey through comics-making began at the age of seven, often in response to

popular media representations. For example, the popular film, *Batman* (1989) issued into a range

of storytelling practices early on in my life, captured on notebook paper in pencil, as well as

through storytelling with action figures, sometimes captured in Polaroid photography. When

beginning their career as a professor in reading education, I began to further explore their

personal and pedagogical history with comics. The guiding question of what early experiences

and texts led to my current practices was salient as I first began to capture these experiences in

words only. The following vignette was written in 2017 in a doctoral studies course, focused on

intersections of identity and personal exploration:

> *I am beginning to contend with the fact that I am fan of comics to the extent that I accept*
>
> *alternate versions and different directorial styles in films where others might not. I just*
>
> *saw Batman v. Superman in the theater this weekend. Some of my friends have been*
>
> *talking about how they fell asleep watching it. Director and writer Kevin Smith has been*

one of the voices who sees the value. It's community, and it's fandom, and it's keeping

the story out there and alive on the screen.

It reminds me of when I was a teenager and went to see Batman & Robin. It didn't matter

that there were too many puns and some of the visual effects were cheap. It was my hero

on the screen. I even wrote a letter in defense of the film to Wizard Magazine at the time

(kind of embarrassing now, but definitely evidence that I wanted to defend the characters

I love).

So, I'm willing to go to the lengths of embracing a version of the story that others don't.

I'm not sure that makes me anything special, other than fan who's hungry for the story no

matter what form it takes in exact detail.

Even when encountering a representation of a comics story that was lacking, my sense of

fandom was resilient and I worked to find the positives of the story. There is a ritualistic sense to

fandom (Jenkins, 2020), including avocations for building collections (Geraghty, 2017) and

enacting characters and storylines through cosplay (Rosenberg & Letamendi, 2013). The

flexibility and limitations of applications of fandom depend on the materials presented and the

activity/engagement of the fan. Some fans enact their own brands of storytelling through

fanfiction communities (Mathew & Adams, 2009). The ways in which fandom have been and

continue to be resonant in my life intersect and sometimes extend my desire to see a range of

characters represented as I shift my thinking towards a comics pedagogy that invites readers to

see themselves reflected, and to draw upon comics affordances to tell stories that have not yet

been told, or shared enough. Within the context of online multimodal instruction, I was able to

connect their love for comics making and reading with content that was popular for young

students.

    In Figure 1, the educator merges their interests in comics and film as forms of visual

literacy, noting voices in the entertainment field and in fandom to speak to this convergence. The

presence of cultural artifacts through comics and materials/brands related to comics speaks to the

textual force of the materials for both consideration and creation in autoethnographic work. It is

impossible to divorce branding and popular culture from the work that the educator has done in

the classroom, with examples from earlier literacy interactions and further connections. The

educator embraces the powerful role of media and fandom as essential attributes of personal and

classroom culture. There is the notion of affinity in what the educator describes as characters that

they love.

Figure 1

Comics Notebook Page – My Use of Science Comics and Blabey's Bad Guys (2016) to Present

Content Online, Summer 2020
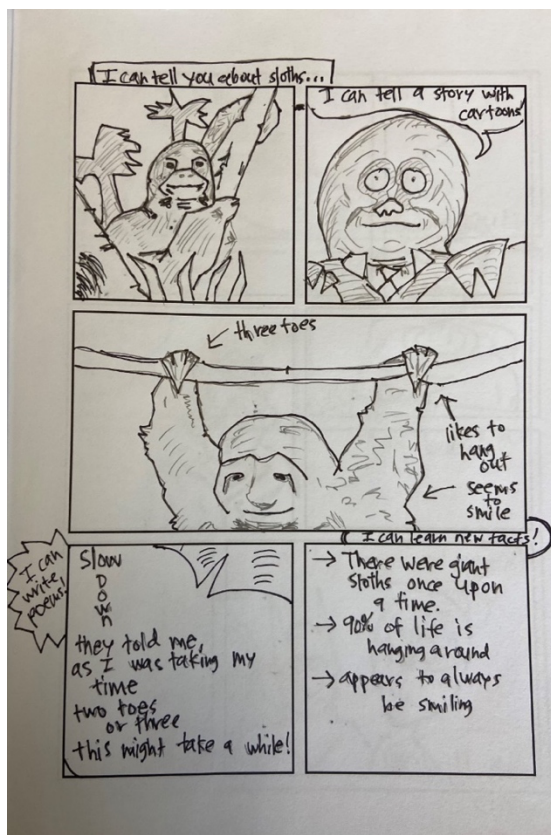
Additional steps began in the early winter months of 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, as I began to map these experiences onto the affordances offered by the comics medium. The integration of words and images led to a first publication (DeHart, 2020), and has since evolved into further thinking about details of pedagogical history, and the development of the project, given the autoethnographic framing of the project. My creations and responses took place within a notebook (see Figure 2), delineated into comics panels, which became a kind of diary for both the time and project.

Figure 2

My Comics Notebook, Created with Popular Characters that Appealed to Children in an Online Setting.

Creating Pathways

Given the multimodal affordances of graphic novels and comics, they are uniquely suited as both a step in the process as well as an end product of autoethnographic work. *Belonging*, by Nora Krug (2019) is an example of this kind of identity work. The book is collage-like in its

construction, features replications of archival documents, and stems from a year's long process of document analysis, as well as personal and historical inquiry from the author. Krug (2019) sought family photographs and interviews, documenting these experiences and her memories through both words and images. Each page or section of the graphic novel works in a new way as Krug (2019) unfolds the journey of traveling into the past and into personhood and nationality with the reader.

In order to accomplish this type of work, the author/researcher must consider the types of documents and data analysis processes that are essential and aligned with the project. An inquiry into past experiences, for example, might entail considering archives. Though my work focuses on comics, I returned textually to early examples of comics I read as a young person. These artifactual revisits worked initially as memories of familiar pages, but also as a new kind of seeing as I reflected on how my perspectives have changed and how my understanding has grown.

Expanding Identity

While I speak and write as a White cis-gender male scholar, I also take this opportunity to note that comics have been a place for storytelling for a wide range of experiences. It is not their goal to sublimate this truth and make it their own, but instead to act as a signpost to the pedagogical possibilities of inviting voices in ways that are culturally responsive and appropriate, and to highlight ways of composing that allow for a range of methods.

Kedley and Spiering, (2017) emphasized the possibilities of using graphic novels to speak to "actively combat homophobia and strive for gender and sexuality inclusivity in classrooms" (p. 54). Lyga (2006) wrote of the potential for engaging young readers with graphic novels, while Hansen (2012) extended the applications of this medium to adolescents. Moeller

and Becnel (2018) "took a holistic approach to the data collection, looking for such textual and

visual features as setting, character names, dialect, facial features, skin color, and hair texture to

inform our ideas about characters' races" (p. 5) in graphic novels, noting that educators must

seek out books that allow for representations of a range of cultural, racial, and ethnic

backgrounds.

To paraphrase artist Dawud Anyabwile in his interview with Gayles (2010), there are still

stories that are de-centered and not yet told. Visual autoethnography, including a focus on the

use of comics, may be an avenue of researched expression and shared academic and narrative

experience that those who have been othered might consider. Figure 3 illustrates this exploration

of putting on "author glasses" and creating in words and pictures to represent experiences.

Figure 3

Comics notebook page reflecting on pandemic experiences, Fall 2021.
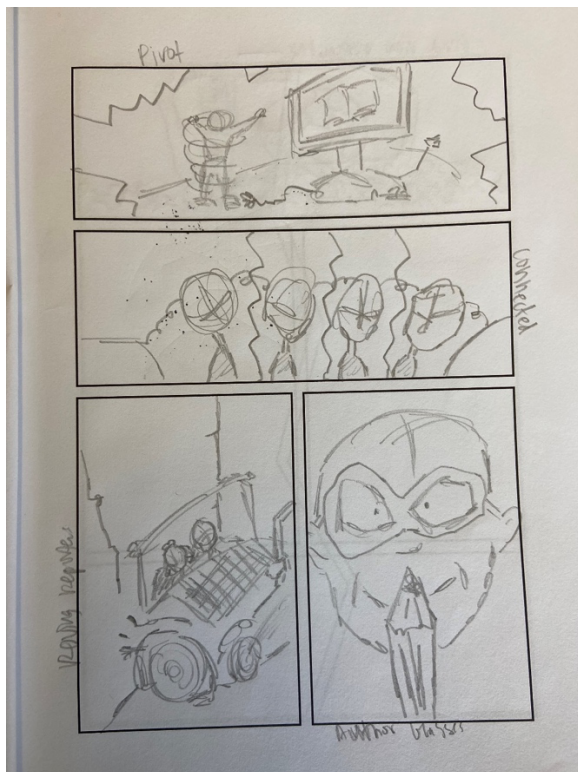
Conclusions and Future Exploration

Following from this discussion, the uniqueness of the comics medium as a textual site for identity work is of central note. Using visuals and comics as a way to explore self and experience allows for creative rethinking and exploring across words and pictures – a step into literally envisioning the space that we create as educators, and allowing opportunities to reflect on particular choices in instruction. This move to multimodal composing can also be helpful in repositioning the ways texts work, allowing for a window into the ways that students can compose and share. Comics offer a refraction of experiences through a unique visual design, including words, images, thought bubbles, word balloons, grids, gutters, and tiers. While none of these features are likely new to the seasoned reader of comics, each feature offers much to consider in terms of authorial storytelling design.

Comics allow for multiple views of multiple realities, while creating a range of avenues to those multiplicities. Following from this notion, comics not only tell the reader about the experiences of those who might challenge their world views and expand thinking about human life, but they quite literally show their audience what these experiences look like. As a recent example, I turn to Harmony Becker's *Himawari House* (2021), in which characters experience life in Japan, along with language and customs. English and Japanese characters exist simultaneously, and the images convey the setting in vivid ways. Autoethnographic composing, for me, has included a return to texts that have been foundational – even from early childhood.

Hsin and Yu (2021) noted, "Children's identity is multidimensional" (p. 318). As has been explored in this article, comics offer a unique vantage for many dimensions of meaning-making through the features that are endemic to their textual design; these elements then serve as designs upon which readers can seize to conceptualize and actualize their own compositions.

As research has suggested, comics are powerful for reading and composing - and I would add that they offer a textually unique space for considering the purposes and design of autoethnography.

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