

Excerpt from Barnes, A., Espina, J., Pohl, C., & Robinson, N. (2013). *Utilizing the Graphic Novel as a Medium for Research Education: An Exploration*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Calgary.

The Graphic Novel as an Educational Tool

Our reasons for deciding to create a graphic novel varied among group members. For some, it appealed to an artistic nature, while others were inspired by the opportunity to learn an alternative medium of communication. However, the deciding factor was the literature, which suggests that graphic novels are unique in that they tend to reach broader audiences, encourage critical thinking, and actively engage readers.

In 2013, Cameron & Estes highlighted the apparent reluctance of Social Work students to engage in research education. Their findings suggest that student anxiety and disinterest are some of the main factors contributing to the problem. Possible solutions to this dilemma, put forth by Cameron & Estes (2013), include: encouraging students to engage in the research material by demonstrating its practical application and supporting students to publish their own work. Our group seeks to offer an additional method; to vary the mediums used to deliver and explore information.

Hansen's (2012) study explains that educators are increasingly finding that graphic novels energize students who are disinterested in traditional education methods. Graphic novels also address student-learning needs, specifically the needs of visual learners, who tend to find that their learning style is increasingly less practiced in post-secondary institutions in faculties outside of the Fine Arts. Hansen (2012) advocates for the implementation of graphic novels in educational settings

by stating that, graphic novels enhance students' analytic skills when you consider the multiple meanings embedded within the text – created by the pairing of words and visuals (Hansen, 2012). These findings begin to demonstrate the multiple reasons as to why educators include graphic novels in their teaching. Hansen's (2012) findings also state that graphic novels reach broader audiences – both inside and outside of the classroom setting. According to Hansen (2012) the visuals in graphic novels aid the reader's understanding of the text; which she emphasizes is particularly useful for English as a Second Language (ESL) students.

We propose that graphic novels are beneficial to the public as a whole, including those who do not have research backgrounds. The use of graphic novels to teach research methods can actively engage more students as the literature clearly demonstrates students are motivated to work with graphic novels. (Jacobs, 2007; Hansen, 2012; Dallacqua, 2012; Bakis, 2013). Likewise, by publishing graphic novels about research methods and making the information accessible to all, individuals from other disciplines or backgrounds might be more inclined to read, and by extension, form some understanding of the material.

Nathanial Burney (2011), a criminal defence lawyer in New York, exemplifies how graphic novels can be utilized to communicate complex subject matter to the general public in his cartoon blog, later published as a book, about law. In his book entitled 'The Illustrated Guide to Law', Burney skilfully guides readers through the legal process. He takes what some would categorize as a seemingly dry subject and turns it into an interactive learning experience. Based on the blog's success and viewership, Burney was granted publication in 2012. However, his blog still remains

open, meaning that a significant amount of the information included in the published book is accessible online. Barney (2012) states that he leaves the site open partly in hopes of debunking some of the legal myths that are prevalent in today's society. He also aspires to educate the general public about law, and based on the amount of people following his blog, it appears that the public is taking advantage of this opportunity. Burney's goal is then similar to what we, as a group, are hoping to achieve with our graphic novel – to educate a wider demographic about a specific topic, namely research methods.

Hoover argues, "The reality of contemporary information economy is that images are in higher circulation and higher demand than words and print" (2012, p. 177). "As images become ever-present in the communication of information between entities, communities, and individuals, educators must start to consider how to incorporate visuals or multimodal texts into their lessons" (Hoover, 2012, p. 177). Schwarz (2009) supports this argument by stating that while students explore new media technologies or modes of communication outside of the classroom, the focus within the educational institutions is still predominantly on the printed word.

In the context of a university setting, graphic novels offer a unique opportunity to teach students how to effectively use multimodal texts, by focusing their attention on the elements which support the words – specifically the visual, gestural and spatial patterns (Jacobs, 2007). By understanding these elements, students can begin to incorporate multimodal texts into their own communication strategies. This is significant since Hoover (2012) implies that multimodal texts can be particularly useful for communicating social justice issues to the public, policy

makers, colleagues, and supervisors. Therefore we argue that learning how to use and incorporate multimodal texts into communication patterns is an important skill for Social Workers in the formal work setting.

According to Dadra (2013) graphic novels are distinctive because they tend to position the reader as an intimate participant in the story's construction. McCloud demonstrates Dadra's point by stating that "comic panels fracture both time and space... offering a rhythm of unconnected moments" (1994, p. 67): it is then up to the reader to bridge the gaps between these moments in order to create a unified story. By bridging the gaps, the reader becomes an active participant in the story's construction. As an active participant, he or she is forced to re-examine the text in order to search for multiple meanings in the words and visuals, to create a plausible connection between the comic panels. This attention to detail, Dadra (2013) suggests, allows for a unique opportunity to connect with the reader and asks that he or she re-evaluate his or her expectations or critical perspectives. This connection between the author and reader, expresses how graphic novels can be used as an effective tool to change individual attitudes towards social justice issues, or in this example, feelings towards research methods.

In brief, there are multiple reasons as to why graphic novels ought to be incorporated into postsecondary education. In this section, we highlight how graphic novels reach broader audiences, engage readers, and promote critical literacy by forcing the reader to examine the words and visuals embedded in the multimodal text. With regards to this particular assignment, we believe that by creating a graphic novel we have the opportunity to reach a broader audience

outside of the parameters of the classroom setting. Additional benefits of creating a graphic novel include expanding our competencies in multimodal communication, expressing individual and group creativity, and engaging with the material in an enjoyable and meaningful fashion.

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