

Exploring the possibilities of reporting teacher research through comics



If you are reading this, you probably have an interest in academic publishing

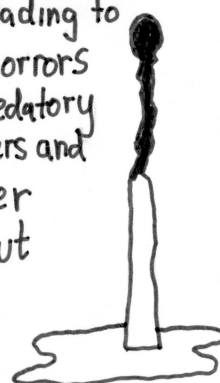


The pressure to publish can be agonising...

educational institutions

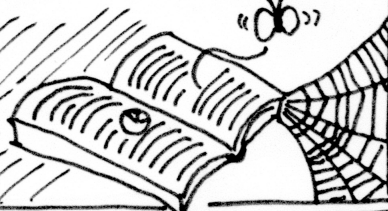


... leading to such horrors as predatory publishers and teacher burnout

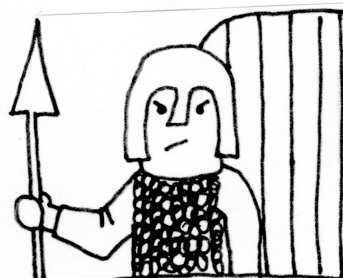


Perhaps the worst thing is that vast swathes of this writing are never even read, let alone cited (Biswas + Kirchherr, 2015)

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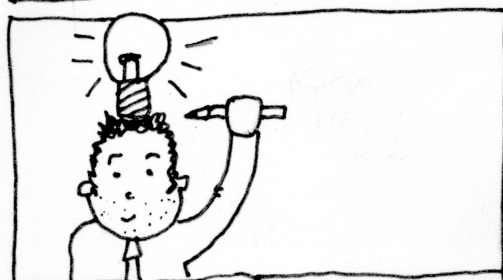


Maybe it's time to re-evaluate the purpose of academic writing and publication...



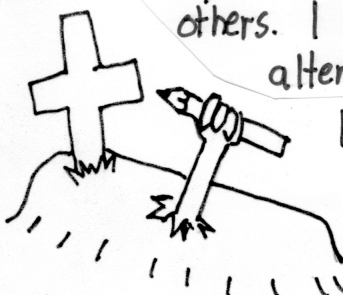
One important purpose is to satisfy the gatekeepers of the profession... and although the model is flawed, the academy plays an important role in keeping research valid + ethical.

We research and write to create knowledge and disseminate it in our field... and beyond



The process of writing in itself can lead to epiphanies - in attempting to express ourselves to an audience, we reach a greater level of personal understanding

It may be difficult to escape entirely from the culture of "publish or perish" but it is certainly worth considering our priorities in presenting our research to others. I suggest that alternative models can be liberating.



One model enabled by modern technology is open access, which allows researchers to speak directly to other researchers.



The Directory of Open Access Journals lists more than two million articles in eleven thousand journals.

Aside from the publication model, however, many of these articles conform to the conventions established in their particular academic genre...



research methodology
blind peer review
academic detachment
literature review
impact factor



Since 2007, researchers have been invited to join Science magazine's prestigious "Dance your PhD competition."

Cynthia Nelson (2013) describes how the dramatization of her research allows her to "emphasize and explore the processes of co-constructing narratives (and) the emotional dimensions of these intersubjective exchanges" (2013, p.223)



I believe that the theatrical presentation of social research shares common ground with comic books, but before I explain let's learn more about 'comics'. What are they?



"Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud, 1993: 9)

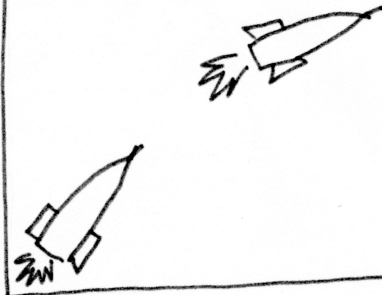
In his seminal 1993 book 'Understanding Comics', Scott McCloud describes comics as...



Comics are words and pictures, but more than that alone. From panel to panel, the author can show changes over time...



... or changes in space.



The images selected for each panel are like the shots selected by a film director...



And although you may still associate comics with children...

... or superheroes...



Many writers and artists are producing comics to tell more complex stories for mature audiences.



Art Spiegelman's anthropomorphic mice survived the holocaust..

Joe Sacco reports from the front lines as

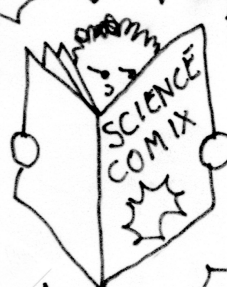


a war reporter



Allison Bechdel explores her relationship with her father, and her sexual identity, in her memoirs...

The English speaking world is catching up to Europe and Japan in diversifying the range of comics published... I believe that comics can also perform a function in reporting academic research.



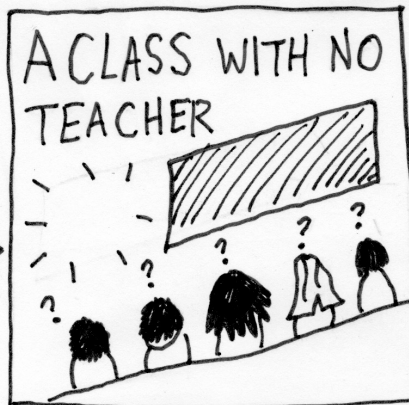
In order to demonstrate, I'd like to take a slightly 'meta' approach.

The panels on the next pages will report on

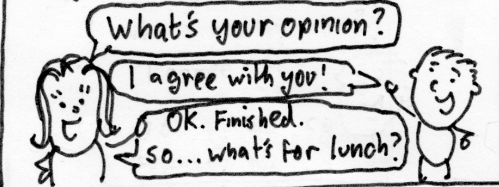
a small classroom research project I undertook, and the commentary will take place outside the panels, in the gutters.



In this panel, we can see examples of 'emanata'. These lines indicate a missing object or person.



The puzzle: A class who were bright and capable but who slipped off task as soon as they felt finished.



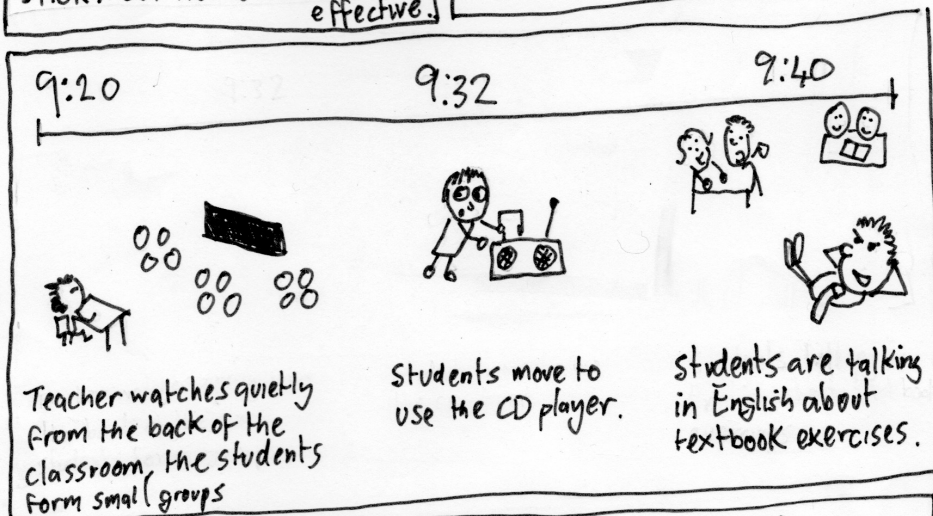
The caption and the illustrated dialogue complement one another.

In this panel, we understand both the vehicle and tenor of the metaphorical phrase used.



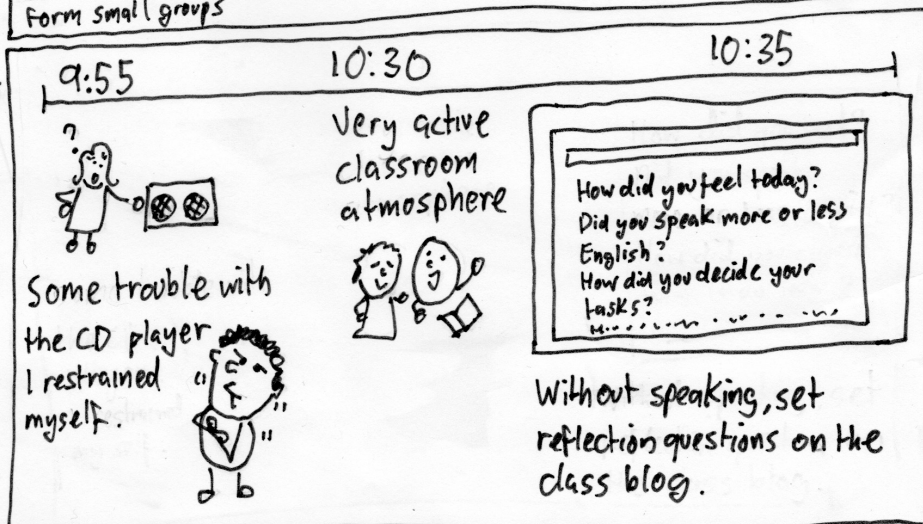
Emanata, the visual iconography of comics is culturally specific. These spirals indicate confusion in Japanese Manga.

Many graphic or pictorial figures, like timelines, already feature in 'traditional' academic writing.



In this panel, we get a sense of time and space.

The illustrations place the researcher squarely in the research context. In fact, here he is foregrounded, whilst the



→ learners are almost peripheral.

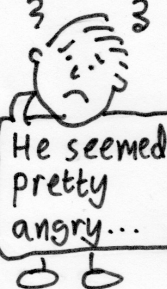
The split screen technique, used to great effect in cinema by Bran De Palma, allows us to see...

After the lesson, I blogged about the experience...



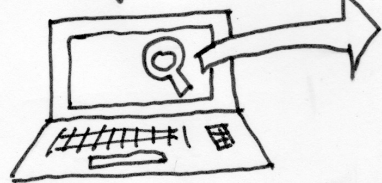
...meanwhile?

What's up with him today?



.. the same story from multiple perspectives.

The feedback online from my fellow teachers was very positive...



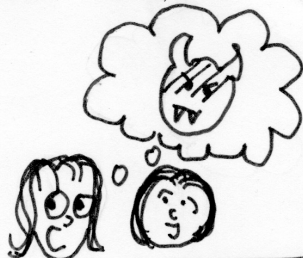
freedom...

.. students were happy to take personal responsibility

great experiment...

In this panel, the thought bubbles reveal the inner feelings...

.. and then I realised that the students had been terrified



.. in contradiction to the 'face'. Very simply the artist can allude to the emotional complexity of classroom activity.

We conclude with the light bulb, as visual metaphor for new understanding

Ultimately, the experience was fruitful for both the students and I. After reflection and discussion, the students understood that I had been attempting to understand them better, and that they were more capable than they realised.



Fin

Commentary

Darren Elliott

There is an undeniable element of gimmickry in publishing research in comic form. This may be helpful in getting your work actually read; in such a crowded field it is good to stand out. However, it remains to be seen whether such work can be taken seriously. Sousanis (2015) demonstrated how an entire doctoral thesis in philosophy and visual communication could be produced in graphic form to great effect, but are comics welcome in language education research?

The first part of this contribution was intended to, briefly, familiarise the unfamiliar reader with the 'form' of comics. Comics, like any other media, have certain stylistic features which need to be understood in order for the message to be correctly understood. I do not contend that this particular content is necessarily best served by presenting it as a comic, however. For the writer, it is labour-intensive and difficult to edit. Although it may be original, engaging, and novel, it is probably not the most effective way of conveying all information.

Where I see more potential, however, is in the use of a visual medium to present vignettes or short exchanges within more conventional academic writing. We are used to seeing graphs and diagrams in our journals (e.g. Segal & Heer, 2010). Why not sketches? Here I present a short, informal exercise in exploratory practice which I undertook to understand a puzzle in my own classroom. As you can see from the marginalia, presenting this as a comic strip allows certain elements to be highlighted very efficiently.

The dramatisation of narrative research, as described by Nelson (2013), seems to me to have much in common with the comic book form. The appearance of the researcher as a character; the ability to show multiple perspectives; opening the narrative to audience interpretation; expressing emotional complexity; locating the research in a physical context. All these are possible in skilled graphic storytelling (and skilled graphic storytellers are not necessarily technically gifted artists). This, I suggest, is where comics could add depth to the presentation of research.

References

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