

**WITH GREAT
POWER
COMES GREAT
PEDAGOGY**

TEACHING, LEARNING, AND COMICS

EDITED BY
**SUSAN E. KIRTLEY,
ANTERO GARCIA,
AND PETER E. CARLSON**

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Thinking in Comics: All Hands-On in the Classroom

—NICK SOUSANIS, San Francisco State University

Comics let us say things we can't in other forms. This principle is at the core of my approach to teaching comics, which focuses on the form's potential for multimodal communication and on how the combination of textual and visual elements has the ability to unlock both new ideas and creative responses to old problems. Therefore, even in the more traditional theory or education-based courses I have taught, in which my students tend to describe themselves as nondrawers, I always put hands-on comics-making front and center. By taking these novice drawers through various comics-making exercises, I want to give students a first-hand understanding of what the form is able to express while also showing them how much more capable they are at visual communication than they realized before entering the classroom. These lessons, I hope, are carried with my students into their other classes and beyond—as future teachers, scholars, and even sometimes practicing cartoonists.

Before delving into the specifics of these courses, I want to note how my prior noncomics teaching influenced what I would do in my comics classrooms. First, as a teenager right up until my final year of doctoral school, I taught tennis to players of all levels and ages. It is, to say the least, imperative that practice be a significant part of learning on a tennis court—you can't talk about how to hit a forehand—you have to move your arm, your feet, watch how someone else's body does the motion. Theory isn't unimportant—I introduce analogies such as likening the way air flows over an airplane wing that provides lift in relationship to how topspin makes a ball dive—but ultimately this is something you have to feel to understand. My other primary teaching experience was an undergraduate public speaking course at Wayne State University that I taught for several years. I saw my role as not unlike what I did on the tennis courts: I provided structure, prompts, feedback, coaching, and lots of encouragement, but so much of the time I sat in the back of the classroom as each student performed, and I watched them grow on their own over the term. (I might

add, on a theoretical note, as a doctoral student, I was quite taken by Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, which drew lessons from the story of an eighteenth-century schoolteacher who couldn't speak the language of his students and how this acknowledged ignorance on the part of the authority figure led to an emancipatory learning experience for the students.)

Despite these earlier experiences and a strong belief in the importance of making as essential to understanding, it still took me a little longer to fully institute this practice into my comics courses. Initially I think I treated hands-on practice as more of an add-on than a central focus. And perhaps with comics, where they are perceived as less than "academic," I felt a certain defensiveness, a need to come to their rescue with heaps of theory. In my first comics and education class at Teachers College, I conceived of a number of exercises (which remain part of my repertoire and will be discussed later)—activities to get students comfortable drawing and making their own explorations to connect back to theory. They were a lot of fun, but in looking back, I clearly framed them as supplement. The third time teaching the course, some of the texts we were planning to use were backordered and late in arriving, so I flipped the course and started with the comics-making activities. A few weeks into the course, when the texts still hadn't arrived, I started to apologize to the students, "sorry that we hadn't learned anyth—" And I caught myself. Here I was in the midst of drawing a doctoral dissertation as comics to make an argument that this form could offer as much intellectual rigor as its textual equivalent, and in my own class, while I had them making, I was undervaluing it—seeing the process of making as support and not as core.

And that was a profound realization.

Through these simple comics-making exercises we'd been doing together, they had been teaching themselves and gained a tremendous wealth of understanding that, I believe, far exceeded what they would've attained at this point from readings. One example prompt: tell the story of how you got here (interpreting this as the student wished—the literal commute to the university or how their life path landed them there), and do so in two ways: a three-panel comic strip and also as a two-page comic. What sorts of decisions do you make when working in the three-panel format that you did differently in two pages? What were the challenges of moving one from another? What kind of affordances did you have with two pages in contrast with three panels? Not only could they compare their two distinct versions, but there was a whole classroom of students who'd all tackled the project from their unique vantage point, and now we could look at all of these together, for inspiration, to get ideas, learn new strategies, discover things that weren't working, and see clearly how much they already knew about making comics unfettered by any

expectation of a proper way to go about it. Those experiences were revelatory and set the stage for them to engage with scholarship and read professional works with new eyes. They were hungry for new material to inspire their own works and filled with a desire to transfer this understanding to their students.

From this crucial realization, I would make practice the first thing—and in all the different settings I’ve taught comics, we start with practice and continually circle back to it as the foundation for deeper understanding. In my experience, all of my students are able to make comics and frequently really interesting ones—no matter what their drawing skills—and that practice aids them greatly in getting a handle on the medium. They hit on sophisticated concepts in their making that they later are attuned to observe in the comics we study. And they have so much fun—something we shouldn’t undervalue. Play matters and is too infrequently present in our classrooms. These activities reawakened something every student did as a child. In regards to assessment, for all the quick activities I have them do in class or at home in their sketchbooks, I evaluate entirely on completion, not skill. They are encouraged to try everything. Inventiveness, curiosity, and willingness to vigorously immerse themselves matter most. By making the class a space for them to play—I watch them take risks, work harder than I asked them to do because it’s theirs and there’s a deep sense of satisfaction in seeing it done well. And I suspect they make discoveries many of them might not if it was about their grade.

To accompany some of the practical exercises in this chapter, I want to share two students’ personal perspectives, one here and the other at the close. This is from a student in my introductory comics course at San Francisco State University. Kyleigh, a first time comics maker, reflects on the experience of making her final project, a personal narrative:

I had never made a comic before, and I was surprised by the sense of accomplishment I felt after using this medium. As an English major, I love to use language to tell stories. . . . Drawing pictures that represented my story actually forced me to manipulate my language. It created a cycle of positive feedback that surprisingly strengthened my skills as both a writer and illustrator. In the beginning, I was really nervous about my comic because I am a perfectionist and I do not feel like I am a particularly good artist; I feared that I would get so hung up on how imperfect my drawings were that I would lose sight of the story. The opposite actually happened. The meaning of my comic became much more significant to me than my sketching, and I finally realized that that’s one of the benefits of comics—it does not have to be hyper-realistic to be a successful story.

Drawing comics allows you to really sprawl your thoughts out on paper. Writing allows me to translate my experiences into feelings and words, but drawing my experiences forces me to reflect on how the physical images of my memories influences the way I think and act. In the case of my particular narrative, I think comics' ability to generalize a story was very effective because this is a relevant, commonplace occurrence.

Kyleigh's experience rings true of what I've seen throughout all of my classes—no matter their skill level or prior experience drawing, the act of making affords deep insights. (See figure 1.)

And with that in mind, let's take a tour through some of the specifics.

Because comics accommodate such disparate kinds of drawing styles and skills (consider as a pairing of extremes, the lush, dense hyper-realism of J. H. Williams III to the spare poetry comics of John Porcellino), I've shied away from focusing much on drawing technique. This extends even to my more recent courses within the comics studies program at San Francisco State that are designated "Making Comics." Instead, I'm always looking for ways for students to engage and play with form, to give them a range of ways of using comics to express what they want to say. To this end, I find that constraint-based exercises, as with the three-panel and two-page example above, help them explore and hone in on what works best for them. The constraint limits the focus to one particular aspect of working in comics, but the prompts are open enough to allow all sorts of material from the individual student to make its way onto the page. And it does.

While I prefer to come up with my own assignments, I definitely borrow and adapt from others whenever I can. Cartoonist-teachers Jessica Abel and Matt Madden have come up with tons of great exercises (available in their book *Drawing Words-Writing Pictures* and website of the same name, as well as Matt's "OuBaPo" constraint-based comics-generating rules). I'm a big fan of their brilliant, massive collaborative activity "Panel Lottery," where Abel and Madden provide three characters that anyone can easily draw on model, and prompt participants to draw on three different index cards, one, two, or all three of the characters doing or saying something on each card. The group (or separate groups within a class) then works together to create a coherent narrative from these randomly generated "panels." It's a fascinating activity that offers terrific insight into how to construct a sequential narrative from otherwise disconnected scenes. In all the times I've run it, it's been a wonderful way to get students drawing with no barrier to entry, and working and laughing together as they learn about comics! It's also the sort of thing future



Figure 1a: Kyleigh's final



Figure 1b: Kyleigh

teachers latch onto to see how they can use it with their own students and invent variations for their particular purposes.

The first time I taught my comics class, I wanted an exercise that got students quickly thinking about the entire space of the comics page as a maker does without them being stymied by a lack of drawing skills and confidence. I came up with “Grids and Gestures,” which has taken on a larger life beyond my classrooms (I’ve done it in numerous workshops and as a Twitter challenge (#gridsgestures, for detailed instructions www.spinweaveandcut.com/grids-gestures, Sousanis, 2015) and it has become the touchstone for how I set the tone in my classes. To summarize in brief, I set it up by having everyone look at the ceiling tiles and other features in the room, and imagine putting them to music. Long notes, staccato beats, all of those time signatures represented by the organization of space. We then bring this back down to the comics page and how in comics, time happens in space. I share examples where page layout is integral to the narrative. Then I instruct them: on a single sheet of paper of any size, organize the space into some sort of grid-esque composition that represents the shape of your day (that day, your average day, a particular day), and rather than drawing *things* in it, inhabit those spaces you’ve drawn with lines, marks, or gestures that represent what you were up to or how you felt in those moments. I give them about seven minutes to complete it, and then we share and discuss. As with many of my prompts, I try to explain the exercise so that it’s deliberately somewhat ambiguous to allow everyone to bring their own take to it but also providing enough structure so that they aren’t lost at the same time. Students not only start thinking about the compositional structure of a page, but more importantly they realize how much they all already know about drawing. It’s a starting point to begin to get them past the fear of “I can’t draw” and to remain open and imaginative in finding their own ways to explore comics creation not limited by a particular conception of what they think drawing should be. I’ve expanded on this by making it into a diary exercise for them to do over the course of a week. Grids and Gestures sets up other basic conceptual exercises—one where I work with how much expressional content can be in a single line, and more involved exercises using construction paper cutouts to portray relationships with abstract shapes, color, and composition, and moving onward to more general concepts.

Before outlining the other exercises, I want to highlight some key activities I do that aren’t specifically comics-making but still focus on getting students comfortable communicating visually. This includes “sketchnotes” (as coined by Mike Rohde), which consists of taking notes using a mix of words, simple drawings, and diagramming. (See figure 2.) It is, as Rohde insists, not about

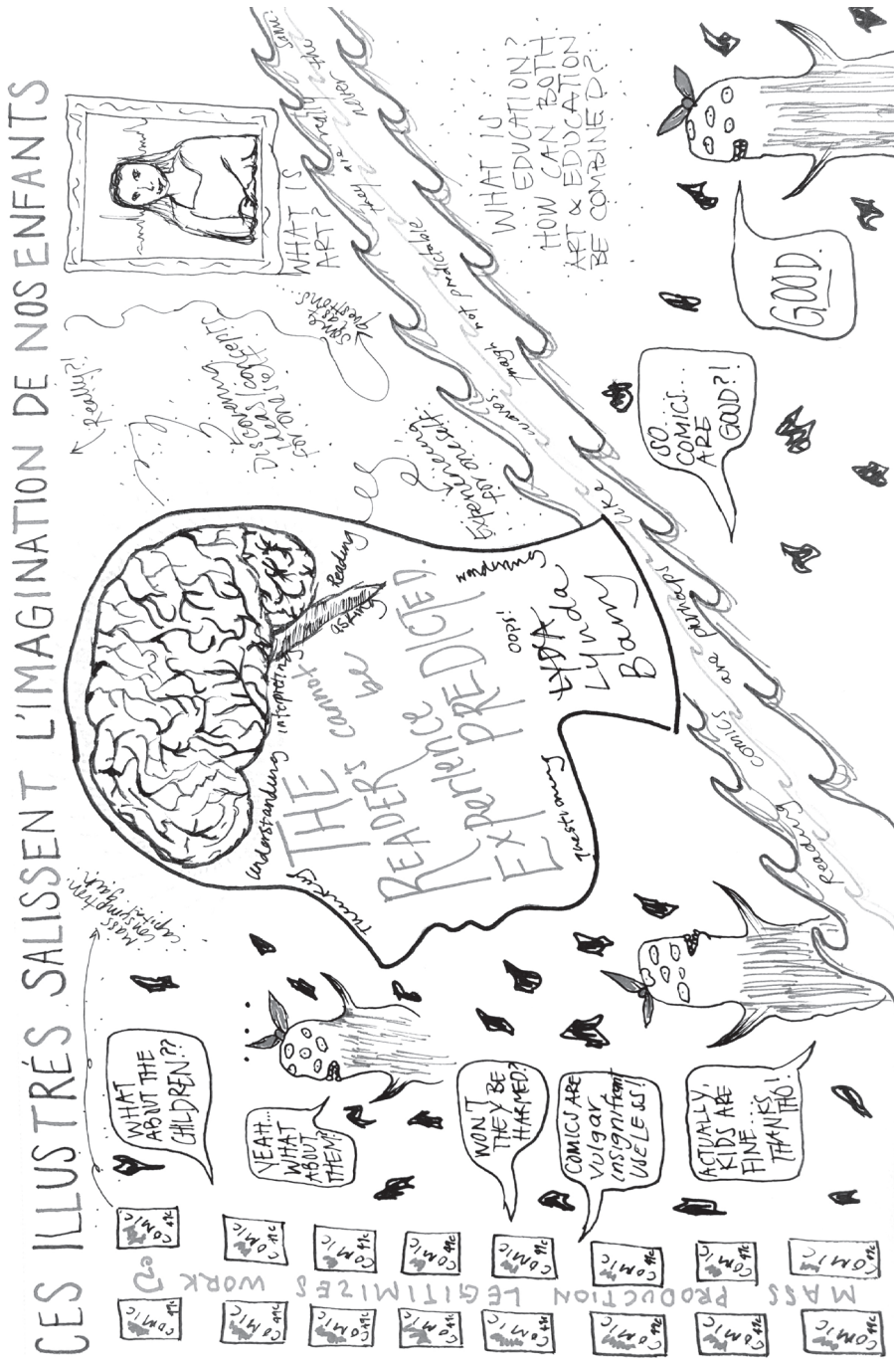


Figure 2: Sketchnotes example

making good art but getting ideas down. I have students make sketchnotes in all my classes and have them do it in at least one of their other classes. The mix of words and pictures is comics-like, visual notetaking as a means of retention is well-demonstrated, and many students continue using this method for taking notes in their classes going forward. Additionally, at the start of semester, I frequently have students make a sketchnote to map out what brought them to the course and what they want to take from the experience. Sketchnoting gets them mingling words and pictures off the bat with no pressure and has been a great way for everyone to get to know one another.

As a means of prompting group discussion and keeping the focus on comics as a visual medium, another key activity involves having students visually analyze and annotate comics pages. I have them do this with every reading, as well as for a few more involved projects over the term. I keep the format wide open—I suggest they trace, redraw, or photocopy the page, perhaps layering over it with tracing paper or acetate, anything that lets them engage with the art in an intimate way. Drawing directly on the composition is the key! This active interaction with the comics page invites them to start noticing everything the authors employ to construct meaning. When I do this for a larger standalone project, I provide a set of pages for them to choose from that I've selected, all of which are particularly interesting in a formal way such that I'm certain they can't help but find things to notice. I tell them that if they spend at least half an hour moving their hand and eyes over a page, they will absolutely start to discover all sorts of things about the maker's choices and the creative decisions within that were not immediately apparent. After they cross this threshold, some switch seems to flip and all sorts of things start to spill out—they find every square inch invested in meaning. The results are frequently this beautiful and insightful explosion of thinking. Students develop their own coding strategies, work in multiple layers, diagram, redraw key elements—find ways to draw out and bring to light elements of the page we'd otherwise be unaware of. As I've been collecting them over the years, I now briefly share some past examples with new students, which has often led to attempts by students to outdo earlier classes, by being more inventive in their formats and more exhaustive in all they bring to light.

As I said, I provide them with particularly complex pages, which pretty much guarantees they will come up with something interesting; but as they get better at this, they are able to do the same with even the most straightforward composition in rather run-of-the-mill comics. Sometimes we turn this analytical spotlight on their own, relatively novice works. And while initially, they may think their pages will be of little interest, here too it turns out that the student can bring to light a treasure trove of inspired decisions. It's

important to distinguish this from doing analysis solely based in writing. It's not that this can't be extremely insightful (of course it can), but in my experience, I strongly believe that the act of drawing on drawings—this direct physical response with the hand and guiding of the eyes through the page—opens students to seeing in ways they couldn't otherwise. The resulting annotated page could, of course, be subsequently turned into an essay if so desired, but the thinking is in that direct spatial engagement.

I'm reluctant to require specific textbooks on process—not that I don't have several and share from them to develop the course—I want to have students see a wide range of approaches in order to develop their own. I certainly draw heavily on Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*: it was a huge influence on me, it's brilliant and accessible, and it's exciting in opening up what comics can be. But as McCloud says, it's the start of a conversation, and I want them to keep adding to it. In my making courses, where we don't have regular readings, I frequently pair Matt Madden's *99 Ways to Tell a Story*, in which he makes a one-page comic of a completely mundane event and then proceeds to revisit it ninety-eight times in different variations and styles, alongside Lynda Barry's *Syllabus*, which offers a glimpse into her course on teaching comics for nondrawers at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Madden's book, in its relentless exploration of form, page after page offers tremendous insight into how comics do their thing. We do a few activities inspired by it, including to imagine we are adding to his book by making a variation of his base story in a way that he didn't. For another, they tell a mundane story of their own in a one-page comic, and then make three different versions of it, where they play with style, storytelling, and distort form (including things that we may no longer even consider comics), challenging themselves to be inventive and question the very structure of conveying a narrative. We tackle a few of Barry's exercises in class; her “let's draw Batman” in successively shorter intervals from three minutes down to five seconds, is always extremely helpful, particularly with nondrawers in seeing how much they can draw, and I find it aids all of them in developing their own styles. Much of it I have them explore on their own—and I see it really help students in getting past their fears and finding inspiration for their own creative process.

Because of this reluctance to have a specific textbook, in my making courses I've been having them make their own “Recipe Book” of sorts, where each student contributes a short, single chapter highlighting some element of comics creation that they feel is particularly important, unique to their own way of working, and was helpful to them in learning to make comics that they want others to benefit from the experience of. Students have focused on elements of technique, ways to organize their work space, inspirational

activities, and other tips in a variety of illustrated and other forms. It lets them take charge of what's important to their own learning in a real way and they get really into it.

Much like the three-panels/two-pages activity, I do an exercise where students partner up and share a brief story about themselves (either in conversation or sometimes via email). Then, without further collaboration or sharing anything visually about their stories, each person makes a comic representing their partner's story and a comic telling their own story. So each person will have created two comics, and there will be two versions of each person's story. We end up with this great look at their distinct approaches to the same story—what took prominence, what was left out—all the different solutions they came up with, which in turn highlights the myriad sorts of approaches one can bring to telling any story.

Some exercises are fairly straightforward, at least in prompt. We create short wordless comics, with careful consideration for the different ways we can do something wordless, but not necessarily silent—so substitutes for dialogue, sound effects, and such. (I highly recommend David Berona's article analyzing Peter Kuper's wordless *The System*, in which Berona breaks down several different approaches to wordless comics: <http://ireadpictures.com/david-a-berona-on-the-system-by-peter-kuper/>.) We explore comics-poetry and the links between comics and poetry, and students make works either adapting an existing poem (found or their own) or something entirely new, with the emphasis on form and the interdependency of text and image—as opposed to illustrating text. (The comics-poetry anthology *Ink Brick* offers a wealth of inspiration: <http://inkbrick.com/>.)

After hearing Scott McCloud talk on airline safety instruction manuals, I've become quite fascinated to see how they might be reimaged in a comics class. It's an exercise that can be helpful in working on clarity of narrative and could potentially be quite useful as future explanatory materials. Essentially, after looking at existing manuals (and things like IKEA instructions), we discuss what's working and what we feel could be improved, and then they try their hand at it at anything from shoe-tying to recipes.

Many of the exercises I come up with spring from thinking about a particular page design or storytelling choice, and some from things in my own work. One such is an exercise playing with metaphor and visual-verbal resonance, a central feature of my approach, which was sparked after reading Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie's short essay comic "This Is Information." I've done a number of pages where I use a single visual metaphor to talk about something else altogether—well-known fictional rabbits to talk about games, roses to talk about the name "comics," a "show of hands" to talk about the

process of voting, and so on. I want them to explore both the metaphorical potential of comics and the process of allowing words and images to co-generate one another. As I've described the assignment (which is best understood after sharing a few specific examples), make a one-page multipanel comic in which you select a single thematic element to use metaphorically or literally throughout as a way of linking the piece together. A short way to think about it is to talk about one thing in terms of another. Keep the metaphor running in some way for each beat of the narrative. A favorite example came from a student using horses (and a zebra) to brilliantly work through her thoughts on her racial identity.

I have students do something with their storytelling that could only be done in comics. This can include taking advantage of the spatial nature of comics, it might mean exploring time in a particular way, playing with the concept of simultaneity across panels, using panel-breaking, or the role the very structure of the composition can play on storytelling. Sometimes the prompts have an additional constraint—as with one that was to be rooted in the place they lived that highlighted time in some way (as in things like Chris Ware's *Building Stories* or Richard McGuire's *Here*).

In my first several years teaching, I hadn't done a lot with minicomics, besides showing students templates for making them. That changed when we Skyped with legendary former Dark Horse editor Diana Schutz, who shared stories about how she greatly appreciated the minicomics she was given by creators at conventions. She could easily take these home with her, and thus they were a great way to get someone to remember you. That idea of something easily shareable, cheap to produce, and finished appeals to students, and I've since made it a staple of class, with students producing both straightforward and wildly experimental minicomics.

I'm a strong believer that we learn a lot by studying and copying other creators. I frequently mimic other artists in my own work to play with styles and approaches (see "A Life in Comics" and "Bi(bli)ography") and am a big fan of R. Sikoryak's perfect adoption of another artist's look to tell his own stories (see his "iTunes Terms & Conditions" or *Masterpiece Comics* for great examples). With these examples in mind, I have them make a short comic about themselves using at least three instances where they directly reference the style from three different artists they admire or were influenced by as a way of telling their own narrative. The results for this have been amazing—their work often makes a significant leap with this project from what they glean from their "muses," and they tell insightful stories about themselves along the way.

"22 Panels That Always Work" is a fabled thing in the comics industry—an illustrated "cheat sheet" by cartoonist Wally Wood, as he put it "or some

CARMEN'S 22 PANELS — THAT ALWAYS WORK —



Figure 3: Carmen's twenty-two panels

interesting ways to get some variety into those boring panels where some dumb writer has a bunch of lame characters sitting around and talking for page after page!” These include such things as “extreme closeup,” “down-shot—cast shadows,” “back of head—part of head,” and so on. After sharing his original twenty-two drawn panels along with numerous adaptations of it by various artists over the years, I have students create their own set, so that they now have this handy reference guide done in their unique styles. We then turned it into a game where I drew numbers one through twenty-through out of a hat (usually around seven in total), and they made a one-page comic based on the sequence I’d selected. (See figure 3.) As with the example above, I witnessed their comics grow in significant ways as following Wood, they were invested deeply in thinking about the particular composition of each panel in a way many of them had not done prior.

I do a few variations on script-to-page translations. For one, we start with a script to a single page (for which I also have the finished comic), and they break it down and thumbnail the page. To give them a good sense of how this works, I share a range of different scripting styles (often the extreme density and descriptiveness of an Alan Moore script alongside the closer to more spare theater directions of Neil Gaiman). When they’ve made their pages, we can compare the solutions they came up with to one another and against the page from the original comic. We’ve expanded on this where they pick an existing comic, write a script from a page of it, then give that script to someone else to produce a page, and again compare the results. They learn about what’s necessary to put into a script and provide enough instructions to get what you’re hoping for—or let it be wide open and surprised by the result. (Often to humorous effect—one student wrote a script for a page from *Pride of Baghdad*, which features lions as main characters, a fact he forgot to mention in his notes for the second student!) These sorts of telephone games are great interactive learning experiences and students delight in them. I’ve continued to introduce variations in my making courses—chopping up the whole process of producing a page—as in, person one shares a story, the second does thumbnails, the third person makes the actual page, and still further breakdowns. Each variation gives students insights into the process without having to be bogged down with telling just the right story—the collaboration and time constraint facilitate quick growth. (See figure 4.)

One of my favorite things to do, which works really well both in class and in workshops with large groups, is an independent-collaborative three-person exercise. The instructions are super simple. The first person takes a sheet of paper and proceeds to quickly (in maybe two minutes) compose a blank panel structure. The paper is then handed off to a second person (without



Figure 4: Making comics together

further comment from the first) who adds words to the page—in the form of dialogue in word balloons, thought bubbles, captions, or sound effects (in five or so minutes). It is then passed to the final person who draws everything. (My first time testing it out, I had them do the drawing second and words last, but it proved less generative.) There's something almost magical about how the disparate elements come together with these, and I think it speaks to the importance of constraints and collaboration to accelerate the creative process. I find in my own work, the more rules I build around the work, the more free I become to explore and arrive at unexpected places. I've increasingly made in-class collaboration a part of my courses. These fast switches, dividing up the labor, frees them from having to think of something perfect that they've invested too much in. They can get their hands moving and thus their minds working, and the results are frequently thrilling. And the energy in the classroom while they're doing this is such a treat to behold.

At the Angoulême Comics Festival in France, I watched a live drawing performance where two teams of cartoonists take turns making a comics

page—one team draws a panel all at once and then they pass the page to the “opposing” team to continue the story in the next panel and back again. I immediately wanted to try with my students, though I was slightly concerned it might not work as these were all seasoned professional cartoonists and my students were almost all novices. But to the contrary, students dove in and tackled their panels with abandon! To make it simple, we divide a piece of paper into four equal quadrants, make teams with two to three students each, and pair them off. Unlike what I’d seen in France, I didn’t give students a rest while the other team was drawing. We have two pages being worked on at the same time. Both teams start in the first quadrant on their respective pages. After five minutes, the teams exchange pages and work on the next panel, and then pass again until they’ve filled all four. I’ve added different wrinkles—sometimes we do it silently, other times with a specific theme to incorporate throughout, and always it’s produced terrific energy in the room. (See figure 5.)

Watching students grow leaps and bounds in their comfort level working together in these quick-paced activities has kept me experimenting. I pull out some feature from a comic we’ve looked at, and then try to reverse-engineer it to make an exercise that constrains for whatever unusual thing the comic did. One might expect for the comics produced under these conditions to be more or less throwaway formal exercises. To the contrary, I’m constantly surprised by how often these formal rules generate unexpectedly meaningful stories. I’m not asking them to discuss their emotions or personal stories, but I think a space opens and the stories flood out almost by accident. A few examples: “Zoom”—an exercise where someone draws whatever they want in the first panel, and then the next person draws their panel by zooming in or out directly from the prior panel, and so on. Sometimes panel layout is arranged at the start, and I’ve also tried it where that too is developed as each panel is drawn, which adds another layer of complexity, especially for the person at the end. We do an exercise where I ask them to sketch out a three-page fight scene and also, separately, a conversation. I prompt them to have an arc of ups and downs and moments of resolution (without any further specifics) and have them focus on page turns and the lower right corner of each page (to build anticipation for the next page). Story material pops out in comics crafted in minutes! One final exercise, something I’m calling “Zithers,” which is intended to get students thinking about the way a comics maker can control the reader’s movement through the page diverging from strictly left-to-right, top-to-bottom reading patterns. I set it up by drawing a curving, possibly looping directional arrow for everyone. Students are to then try and “solve” this pathway, by coming up with a page composition that follows the reading order that the arrow suggests. They

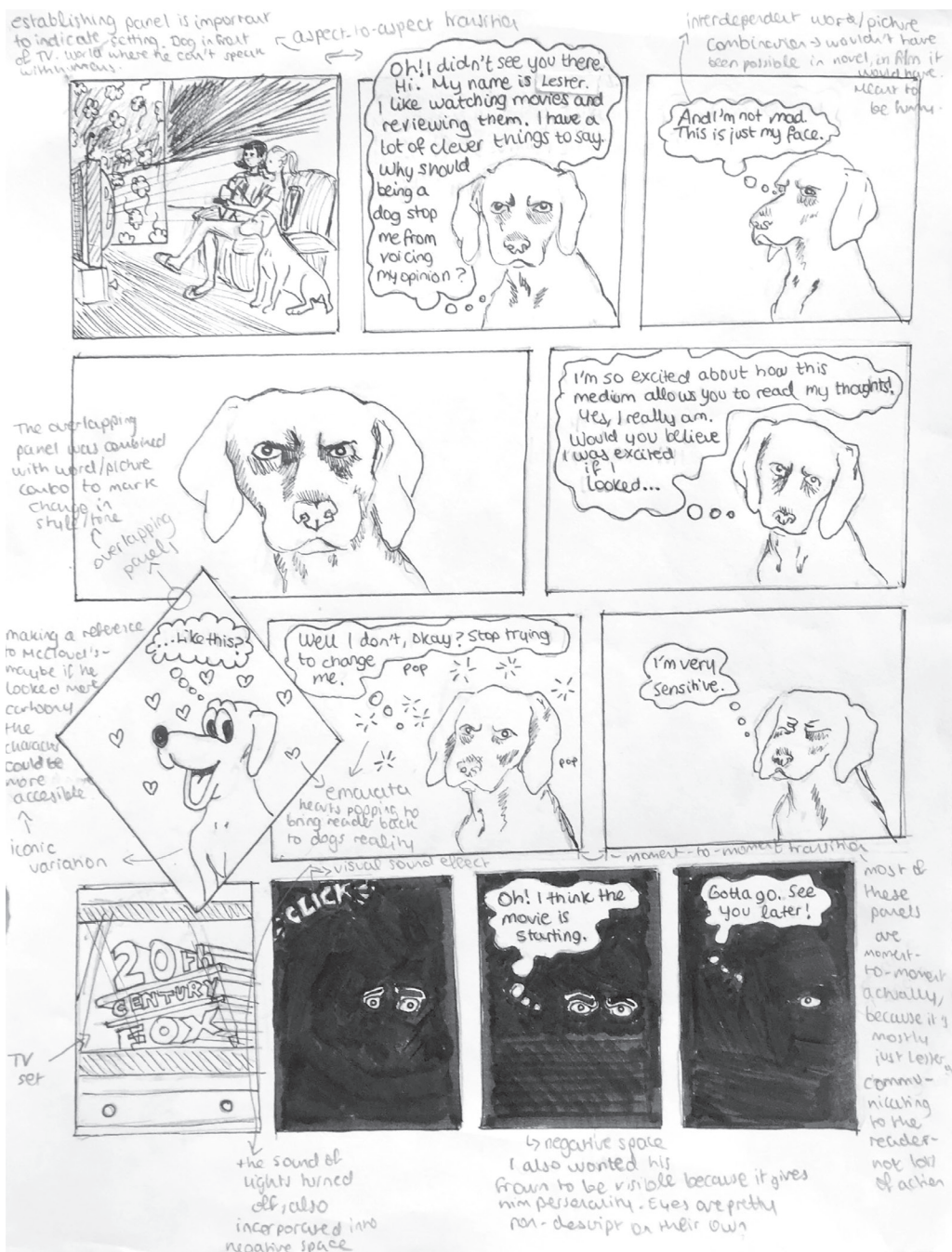


Figure 5: Reverse engineering

can use panel arrangement, overlapping panels, introduce a character leaping across a border, use the placement of text boxes or sound effects, anything they can come up with to get the reader to go in the desired direction. Solving these is hard enough (I don't have anything in mind when I draw them), but they not only figure out solutions but come up with genuinely interesting pieces all from me drawing a looping arrow! I keep trying new things to push them, expecting that some exercises will likely be a bust—but that's rarely been the case as students are always up for these odd challenges and rise to the occasion.

Everything I've been doing in my classroom is shaped by and influences my work, where I argue that comics should be taken seriously in academic settings. When I give public talks, I frequently get a response along the lines of, "I buy your argument, I see that it works for you, but I can't draw." To make the case in a way that I find is more succinct and powerful than all my intensely involved drawings, I have for the last few years taken to sharing an excerpt from one student's work. Let me introduce Odessa—a shy student who spoke very little in our "Comics as a Way of Thinking" course at the University of Calgary. The sketchnote she made about herself at the start of the semester revealed a lack of confidence in her drawing skills but an openness to explore. Throughout the semester she did a number of intriguing comics that did fascinating things with panel breaking, which in turn sent me to gather up additional examples to share with the class. I've thought about her work a great deal over the years since I've begun sharing it, but it was only the occasion of writing this chapter that prompted me to ask her about it directly.

As with her smaller pieces over the semester, this comic she created for her final project is highly involved in exploring form. She plays with the comics panel as window, as support, as tangible presence, and she manipulates the very way we read, reinforcing her point in the narrative by beautifully winding her words around and asking the reader to rotate the page to follow her thinking. It demonstrates an extremely sophisticated understanding of the comics form and it powerfully speaks to how working in visual ways allows us to make discoveries and understand things about our subject and ourselves that we couldn't without it. (See figures 6a–6e.)

I think in looking at her work, we would still agree, this is not the work of a trained drawer in the ways we conceive of that. However, I think it is impossible to miss that what she created is a profound piece of thinking. It shows that visual thinking isn't about technical training, but about understanding the properties of the form and drawing on our natural ability to understand space. It means an enormous amount to me each time I share it,

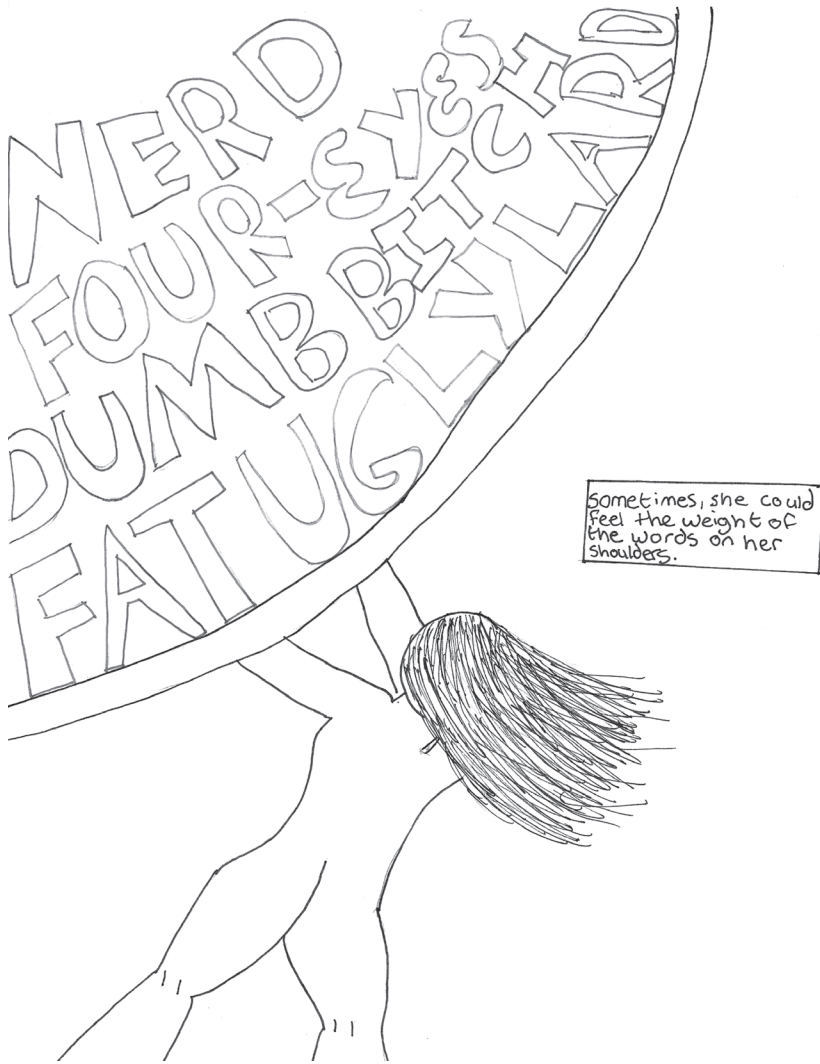
and I see its impact with others whenever I share it. All of them are deeply moved by what she created. (A fact Odessa found to be wild!) I asked her what she was able to express in comics in ways perhaps not available in other forms.

I've never been very good at talking about myself. The anxiety in me makes me think that, when someone wants to know about me, they only ask so they can make fun of me later. Anyway, I never felt like that in comics class. I ended up writing about myself without really realizing what I wrote was about me until about halfway into the semester. It is a lot easier to draw a silly comic about pink elephants than it is to go up to someone and say, "Hey, I'm pretty sure I have social anxiety, sorry if that's weird and sorry if it's not." Being able to draw and visualize something like that let me look at it and say, "You know what? That pink elephant is kinda silly." I'm forever going to deal with the elephant but it's oddly comforting to have something to point at and tell it to shut up. I have come pretty far on that issue in the last couple years. It's nice.

Of its genesis, she describes having the phrase "this is a story" stuck in her head and working with it to see where it went:

Then I got part way through and went "oh whoops" because apparently I'd dug a little deeper than intended and ended up finding the memories of being bullied. I didn't know that it was bullying at the time but now I look back and go, "No, that was not okay." So, there is that. Also, I was coming to terms with the fact I have zero interest in stereotypical "life" stuff like kids or marriage. While I didn't know it at the time I made the comic, though I suspect it helped me figure it out, I am bisexual. Which would explain whenever I tried to convince myself I was straight or someone tried to make fun of me for being gay I felt like I was being stuffed into an ill-fitting box. I spent a lot of time that year wondering who I am and who I should be and it turned out the answer was "who cares?" *I'm me and I'm pretty cool. That's what matters.*

Comics let you say things you couldn't in another form and learn things about yourself along the way. I connect Odessa's experience of discovering her own creative potential to an observation I made in response to someone in a workshop I ran. One initially reluctant participant made this incredibly elaborate three-dimensional metaphorical cutout construction, and then she said, "I'm not usually into artsy-craftsy things." I responded that it wasn't a piece of art, "that's a piece of thinking." Working in this way is available to everyone, and I think the flexibility of comics to allow a broad range of approaches in how we use images, words, and space makes them particularly inviting for anyone.



Figures 6a–6e: Examples from Odessa

And while I certainly want my students to leave class knowledgeable about comics—theory, history, and craft—I mostly want them to be better able to understand and express their own thinking. By incorporating making, I think we can achieve both.

To those who are onboard but worried you don't know that much about comics and definitely don't have the skills to draw them or (therefore) to teach them, I say it's ok to acknowledge your ignorance and to trust your students. Start trying things and let them lead the way. You'll figure it out together.

but she
is STRONG

Figure 6b



Figure 6c

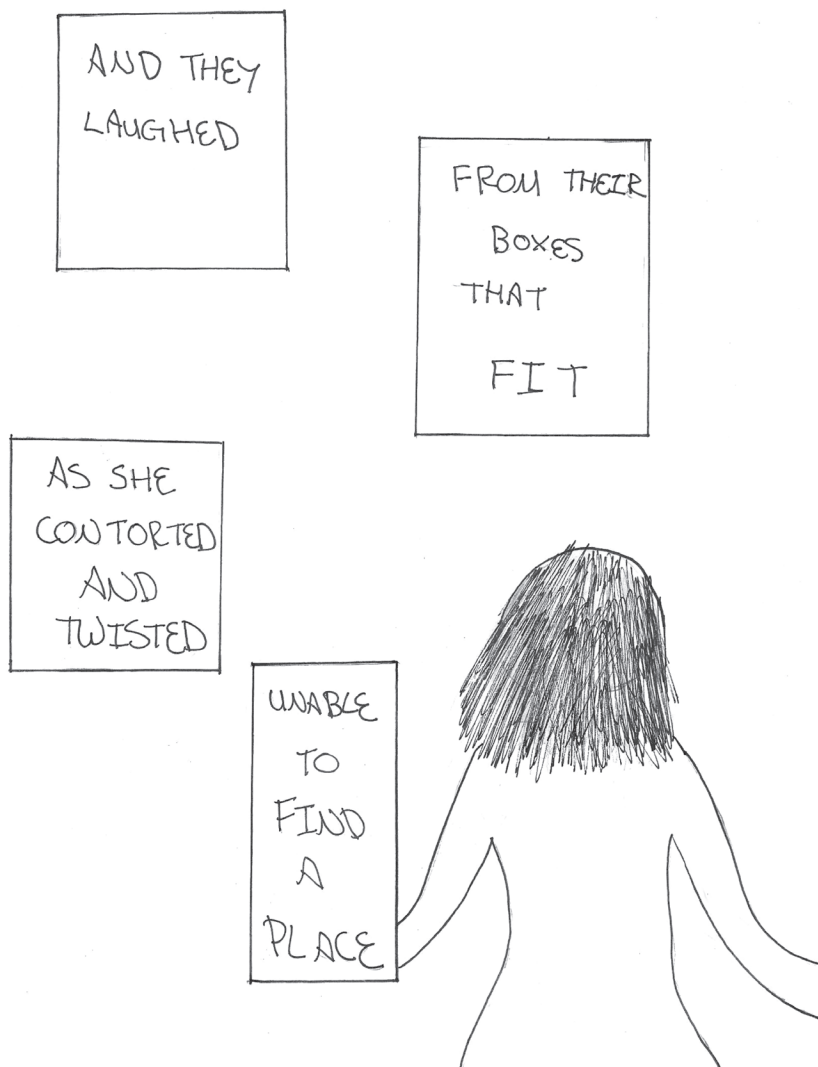


Figure 6d

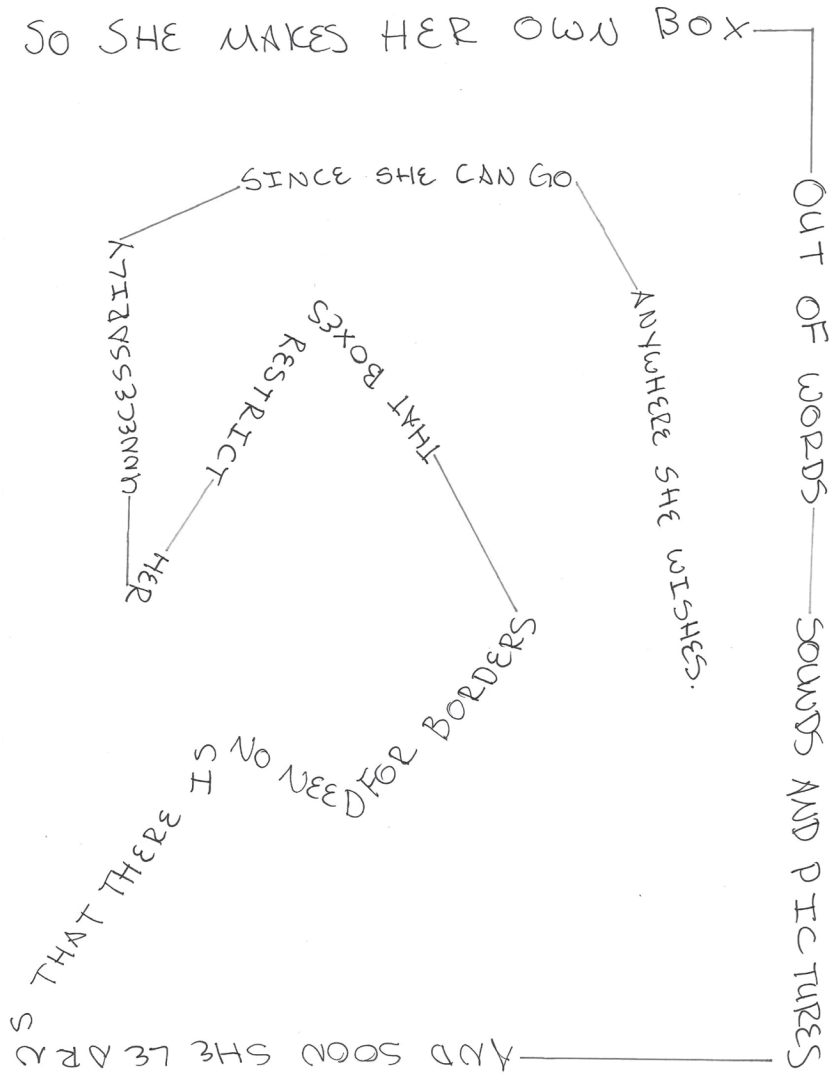


Figure 6e

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OTHER RESOURCES

To see examples of the student activities detailed above, along with his syllabi, readings, more exercises, and other resources for using comics in the classroom, please visit Sousanis's Comics Education website <http://spinweaveandcut.com/education-home/> or www.thinkingincomics.com.

Jessica Abel and Matt Madden's website *Drawing Words/Writing Pictures*: <http://dw-wp.com>

Panel Lottery—a great collaborative comics-making exercise by Abel and Madden: <http://dw-wp.com/2010/05/panel-lottery-an-exercise-in-narrative-juxtaposition-and-editing/>. PDF (with instructions): <http://dw-wp.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/lib-workshop-panel-lottery.pdf>.