


CARTOONING IN THE CLASSROOM: EMPOWERING PRIMARY STUDENTS IN THE NORTHEAST OF ENGLAND BY MAKING COMICS

LA HISTORIETA EN EL AULA: POTENCIACIÓN DEL ALUMNADO DE PRIMARIA
EN EL NORESTE DE INGLATERRA A TRAVÉS DE LA CREACIÓN DE CÓMICS

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Abstract:

This comics-based research field report investigates how disadvantaged primary students in Northeast England engaged with learning to make comics in the classroom. While research since the 1940s has highlighted links between comics and student engagement, little attention has been given to the transformative impact of making comics, partly because educators often read comics but rarely create them. The project *Cartooning in the Classroom* introduced students and teachers to methods of making comics through six weekly workshops, where participants studied *Romeo and Juliet* by designing cartoon characters inspired by Shakespeare's play. Using graphic memoir as both methodology and output, the study employed collaborative practice and critical pedagogy to analyse data from field notes, artwork, observations, and feedback forms. Findings are presented as a graphic memoir that interweaves the researcher's voice with participants' experiences, demonstrating comics' potential to empower marginalised learners and generate meaningful co-created knowledge.

Keywords:

Comics-based research; Graphic memoir; Primary education; Critical pedagogy; Student engagement.

Resumen:

Este informe de investigación basada en cómics examina cómo estudiantes de primaria en situación de desventaja en el noreste de Inglaterra aprendieron a crear cómics en el aula. Aunque desde la década de 1940 se reconocen las conexiones entre los cómics y la participación estudiantil, se ha explorado poco el impacto transformador de producir cómics, en parte porque los docentes suelen leer cómics pero rara vez los elaboran. El proyecto *Historietas en el aula* introdujo a estudiantes y profesores en la creación de cómics mediante seis talleres semanales, en los cuales los participantes estudiaron *Romeo y Julieta* diseñando personajes de historieta inspirados en la obra de Shakespeare. Utilizando la novela gráfica autobiográfica como metodología y resultado, el estudio recurrió a la práctica colaborativa y a la pedagogía crítica para analizar notas de campo, obras gráficas, observaciones y formularios de retroalimentación. Los hallazgos, presentados en forma de memorias gráficas, muestran cómo el cómic empodera a los alumnos marginados y genera conocimiento co-creado.

Palabras clave:

Investigación basada en el comic; Memoria gráfica; Educación Primaria; pedagogías críticas; Alumnado participante.

Over the course of six weeks (April 2024-June 2024), I worked with a classroom of 21 Year 5 (ages 9 to 10) students in a primary school in Middlesbrough UK.

WELCOME
TO
MIDDLESBROUGH
PRIMARY

In this graphic memoir field report, I detail the lessons I designed, the teacher's observations, and the impacts making comics had on the students.

Whose
classroom are
you visiting?

Mr. Murray
--
we are...

LOST
and
FOUND

CARTOONING IN THE CLASSROOM: EMPOWERING PRIMARY STUDENTS IN THE NORTHEAST OF ENGLAND BY MAKING COMICS!

Sign in

JULIAN LAWRENCE
visiting
RODERICK MURRAY

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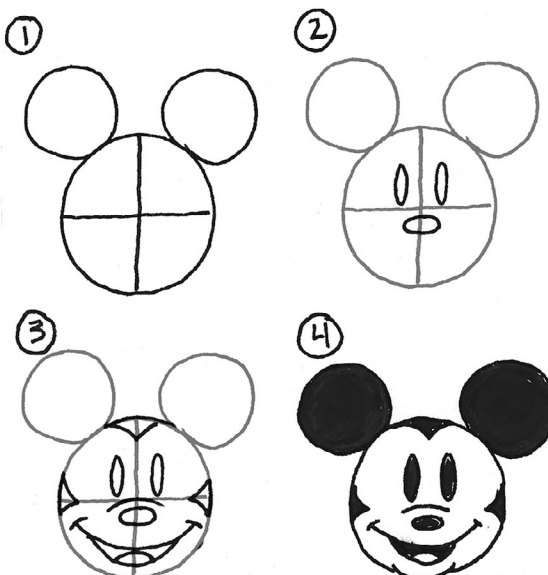
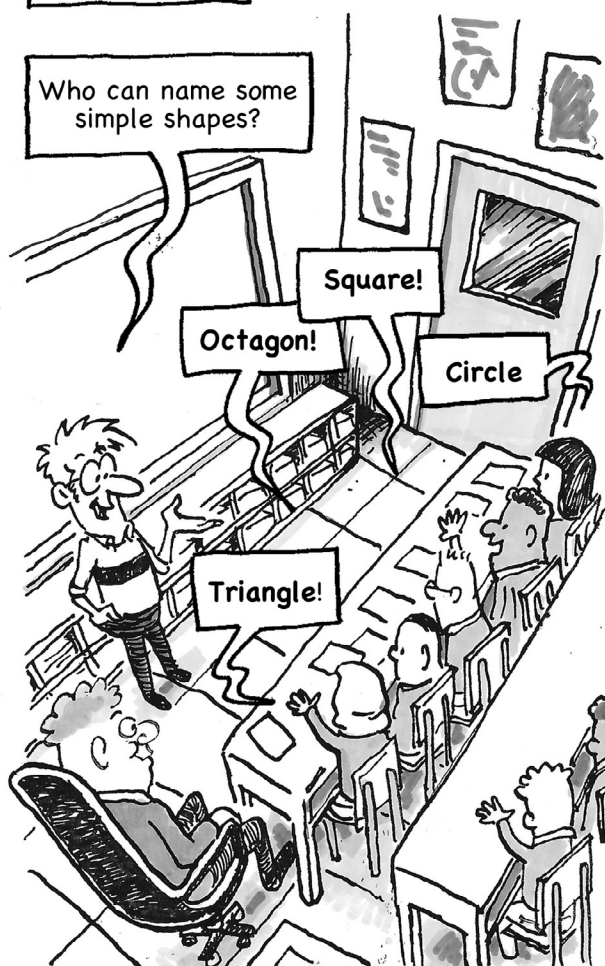
Hello, Julian -- The
students are all set
up with *pencils*,
paper, *erasers*, and
fineliners.

Great,
Roderick! Let's
get started...

In January 2024, the copyright on the 1928 version of Mickey Mouse (Steamboat Willie version) expired. Anyone can draw The Mouse now, and its design presents an excellent introduction for students into character construction, including the ways simple shapes function as the foundation for consistency. Brunetti writes "Cartooning is built upon the Five Cs: calligraphy, composition, clarity, consistency, and communication, each reinforcing the other."¹

Following a brief introduction, I jumped right into the lesson.

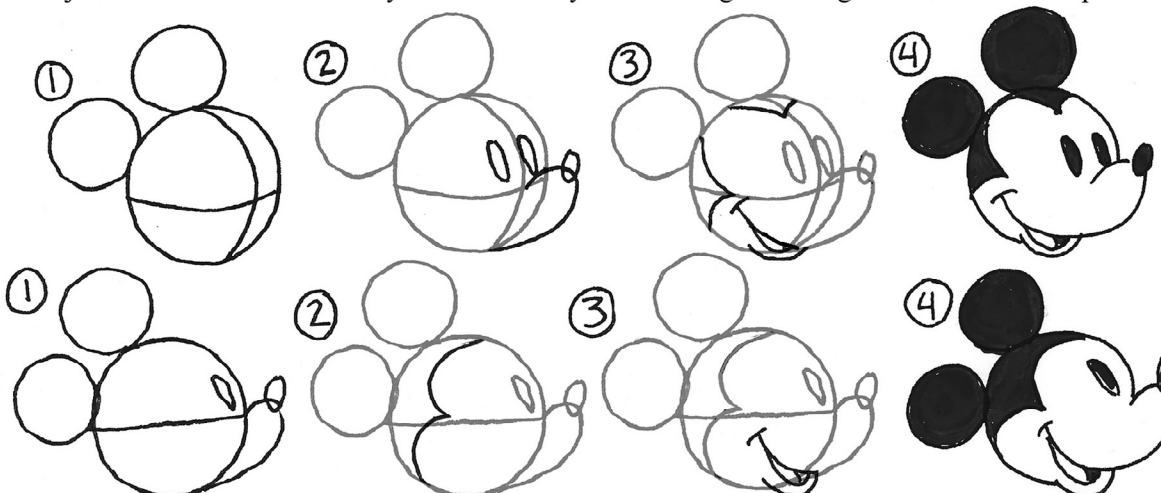
After drawing a variety of simple shapes as a warm up exercise, I used directed drawing and demonstrated putting shapes together with guidelines. The students followed along step-by-step.

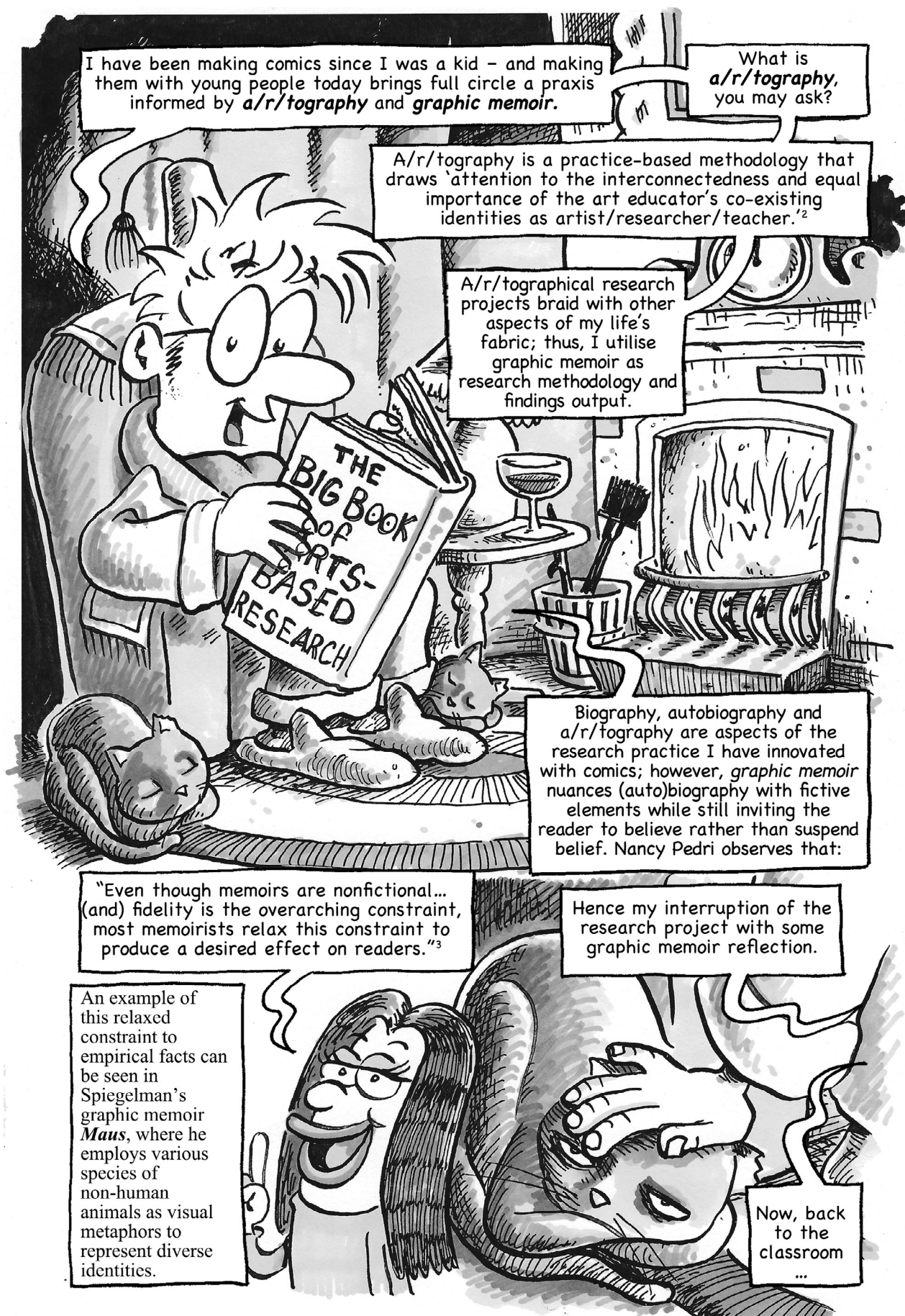


Can we draw Mickey from the side?

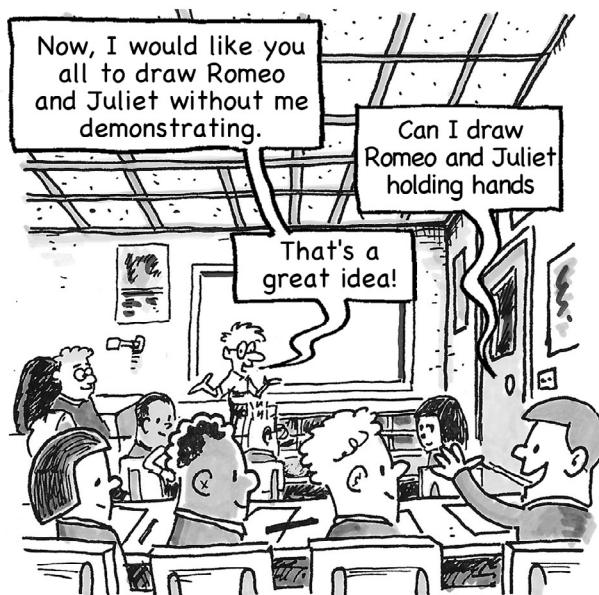
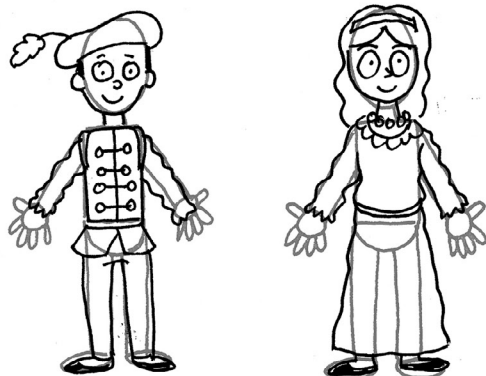


Ginny's question led into the next planned section. We rotated the Mouse's head $\frac{3}{4}$ degrees, utilising guidelines and simple shapes for consistency. Students engaged with visualising two dimensional objects in three dimensions: they understood they were no longer drawing flat circles but 3-D spheres.

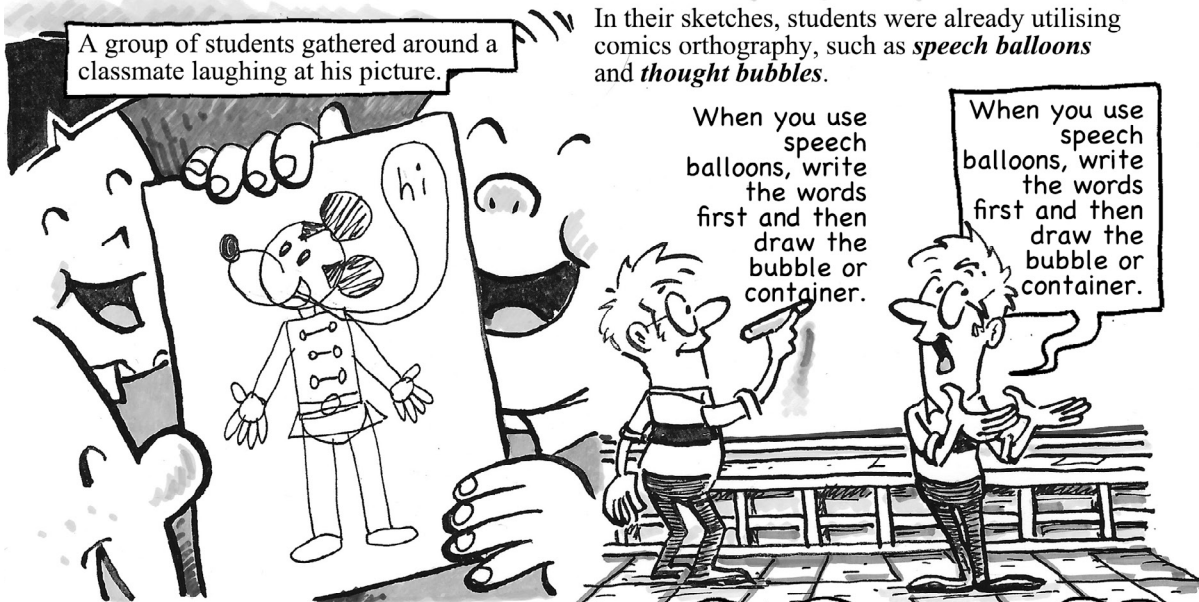




Drawing inspiration from Marcia Williams' cartoons⁴ and using simple shapes with directed drawing, I demonstrated character designs for *Romeo and Juliet*.



A group of students gathered around a classmate laughing at his picture.



The container's tail just needs to point at the character who is speaking...

... *Gag!* -- *Choke!* -- the tail doesn't have to come out of the character's throat!



In this first lesson, I observed student empowerment through the participatory culture and collaborative practice of making comics. The banter can get quite loud sometimes, but it's an inspired creative energy.

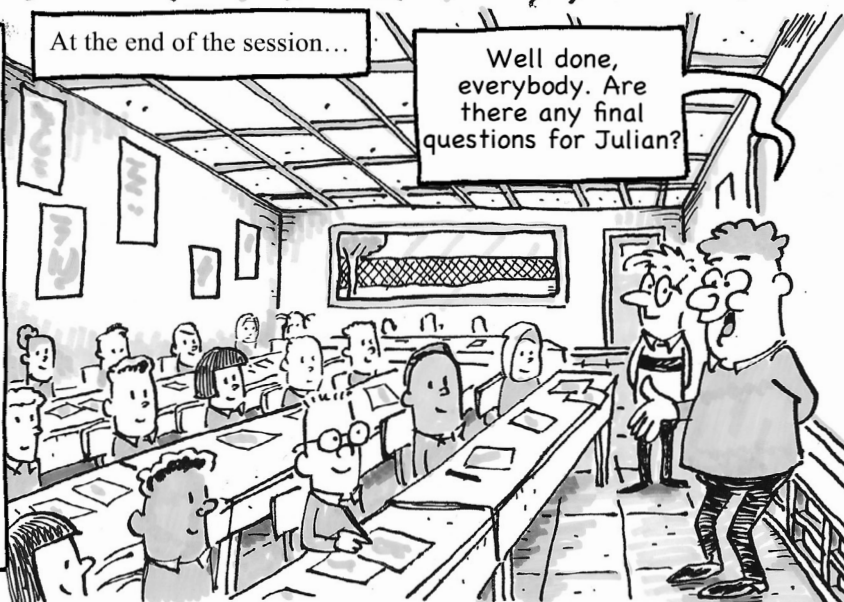


I have been teaching comics to students of all ages for over twenty years, and this positive creative energy emerges in many of the classrooms I visit...

...it takes me back to being a nine-year-old drawing comics with my friends growing up in Quebec, Canada.

At the end of the session...

Well done, everybody. Are there any final questions for Julian?



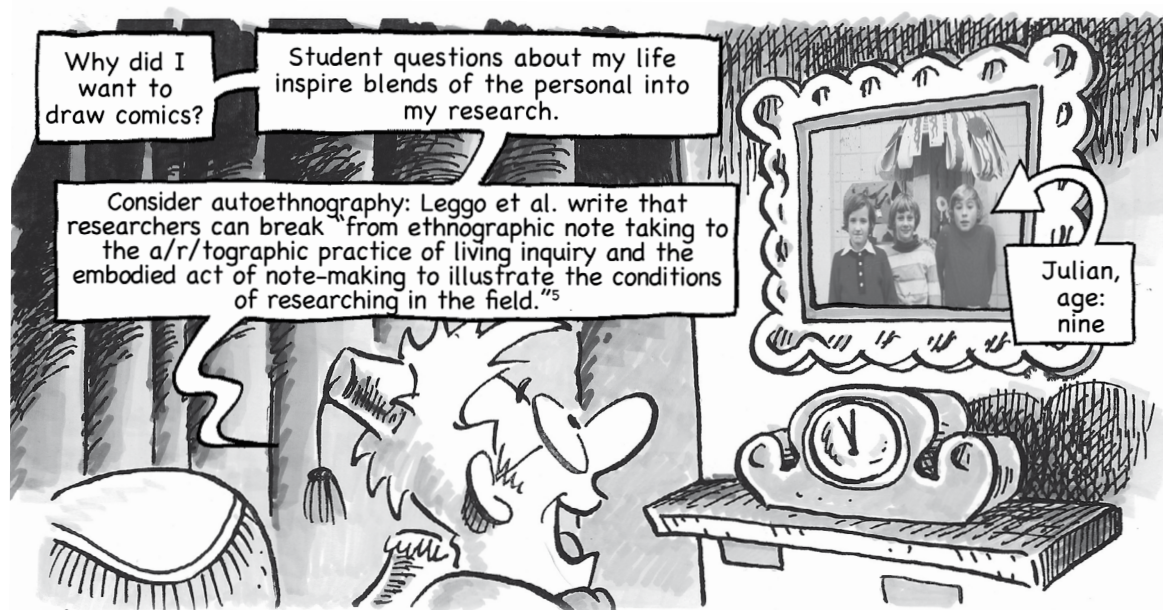
How old are you?

What's your favourite movie?

Do you like basketball or tennis?

Why did you want to draw comics?



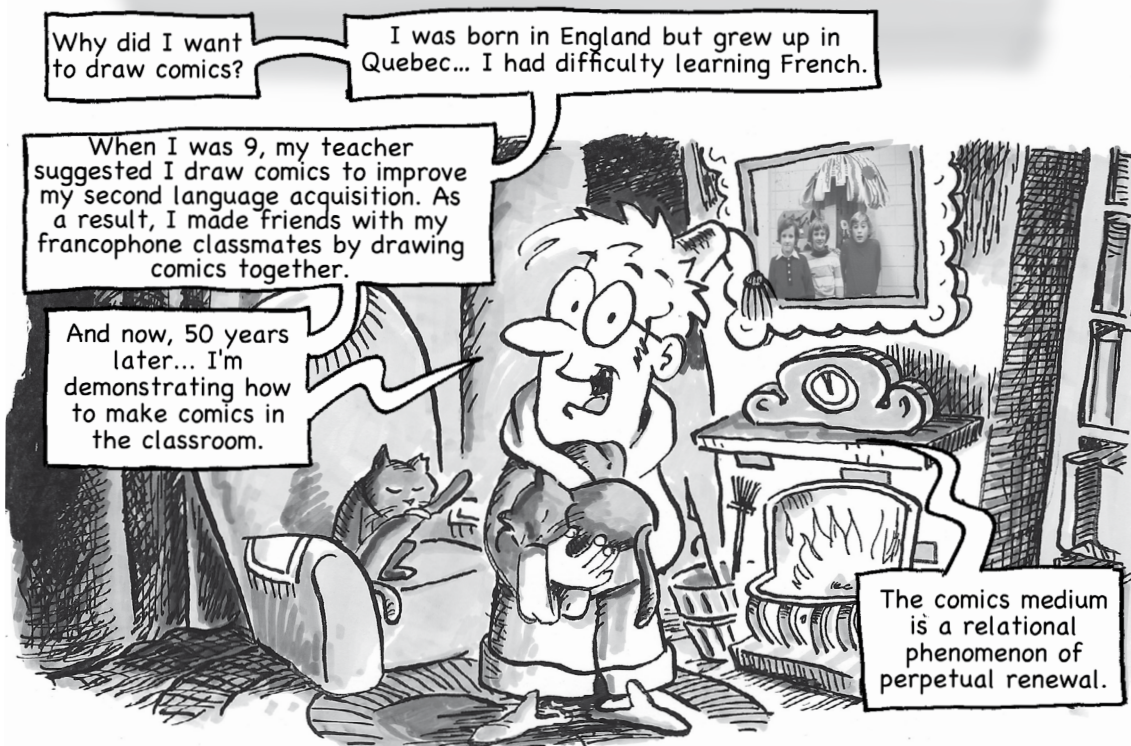


Graphic memoir is a relatively recent phenomenon, and Pedri observes that "no consensus has been reached as to how to refer to this graphic narrative subgenre."⁶

Memoir is French for memory and foundational elements of my identity are informed by childhood memories growing up as an outsider in a French community reading Tintin and Asterix graphic novels.

Graphic memoir presents an apt term for my life-writing research practice with comics: as non-fiction memoir recounts facts in an individual's life framed by memory; thus, it utilises creative narrative techniques not generally applied in historical or (auto)biographical texts.

Graphic memoir, as a subgenre of autobiographical comics, is growing in popularity especially with the recent emergence of Graphic Medicine and the personal stories told by medical professionals and patients through comics.



The following week...

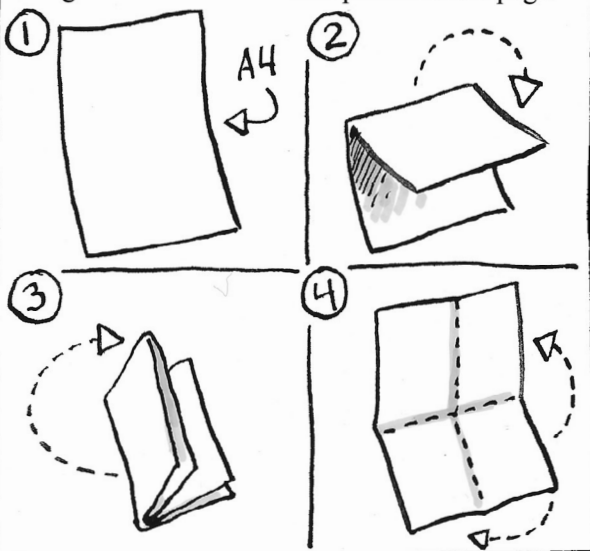
We are doing more cartooning with Romeo and Juliet today.

Yaaaaayyyy!

The students' sketches were stored in individual folders and handed back for reference.

Please pull out a pencil and paper: we are doing a timed warmup drawing activity.

They fold the paper in four, then trace in pencil along the folds to create four panels on the page.



Then they write in the top left-hand corner of each panel the amount of time to draw:⁷

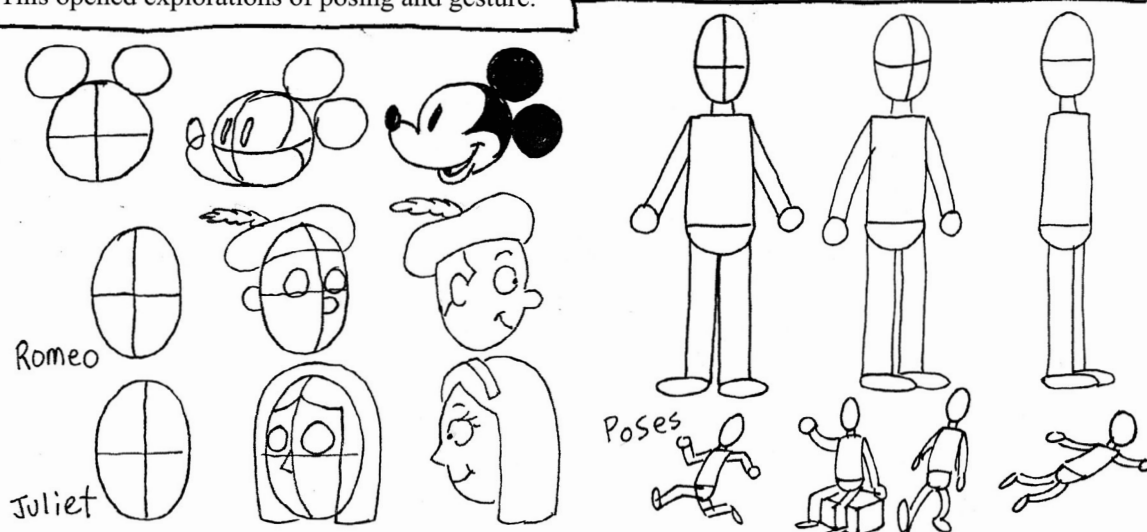
2 minutes	1 minute
30 seconds	15 seconds

The timed drawing exercise elicits a lot of excitement as the young people race to complete timed drawings of Mickey as a review.

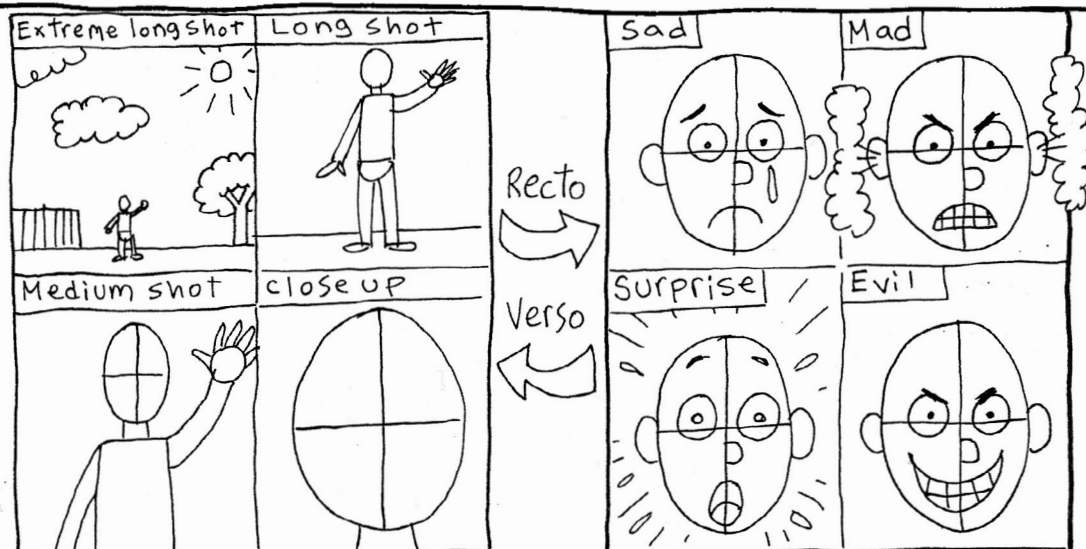
"HAA Ten seconds left! HA!"



We created additional 3D visualisations by drawing turnarounds of Romeo and Juliet in three poses. This opened explorations of posing and gesture.



Students folded another sheet of paper, divided it into four panels along the fold, and on one side we explored camera angles. On the other side we drew cartoon emotions on the face. Students followed along step by step.

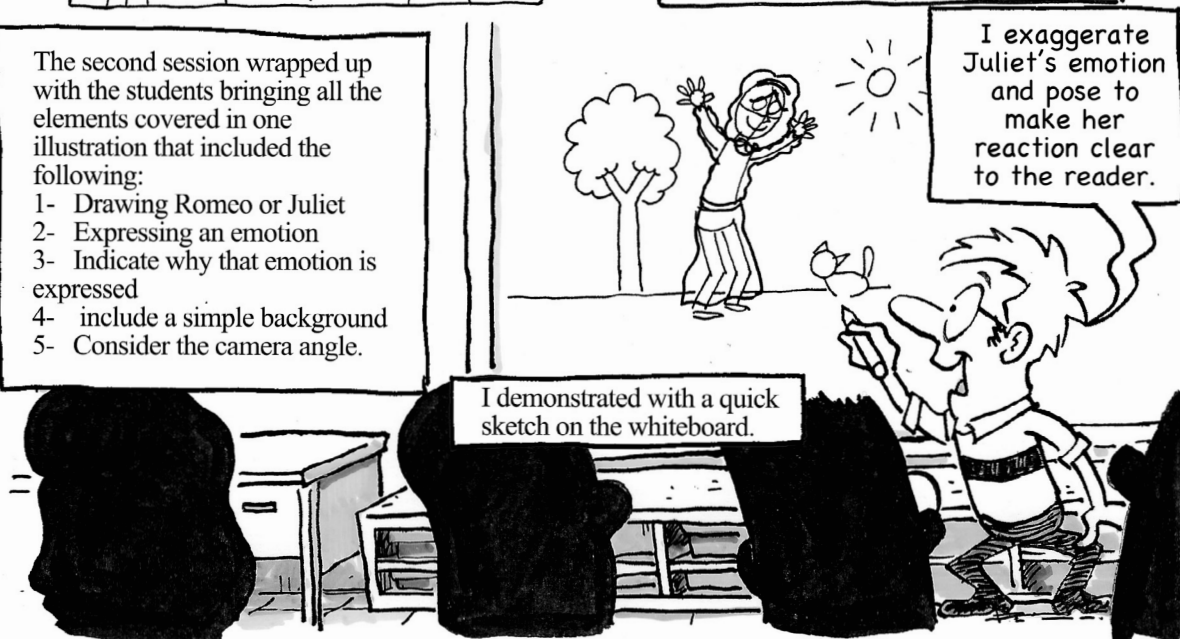


The second session wrapped up with the students bringing all the elements covered in one illustration that included the following:

- 1- Drawing Romeo or Juliet
- 2- Expressing an emotion
- 3- Indicate why that emotion is expressed
- 4- include a simple background
- 5- Consider the camera angle.

I demonstrated with a quick sketch on the whiteboard.

I exaggerate Juliet's emotion and pose to make her reaction clear to the reader.



The community building properties of making comics in the classroom is an emerging focus in arts-based educational research.⁸



Julianlawrence!
Annie is sad!

In today's lesson, for example, Annie was struggling with drawing a background.

Ginny comforted her and called me over. Several students gathered with me and shared examples of their work and the ways they approached challenges with drawing.



If your drawings aren't finished by three o'clock, we'll have to stay here until six tonight!

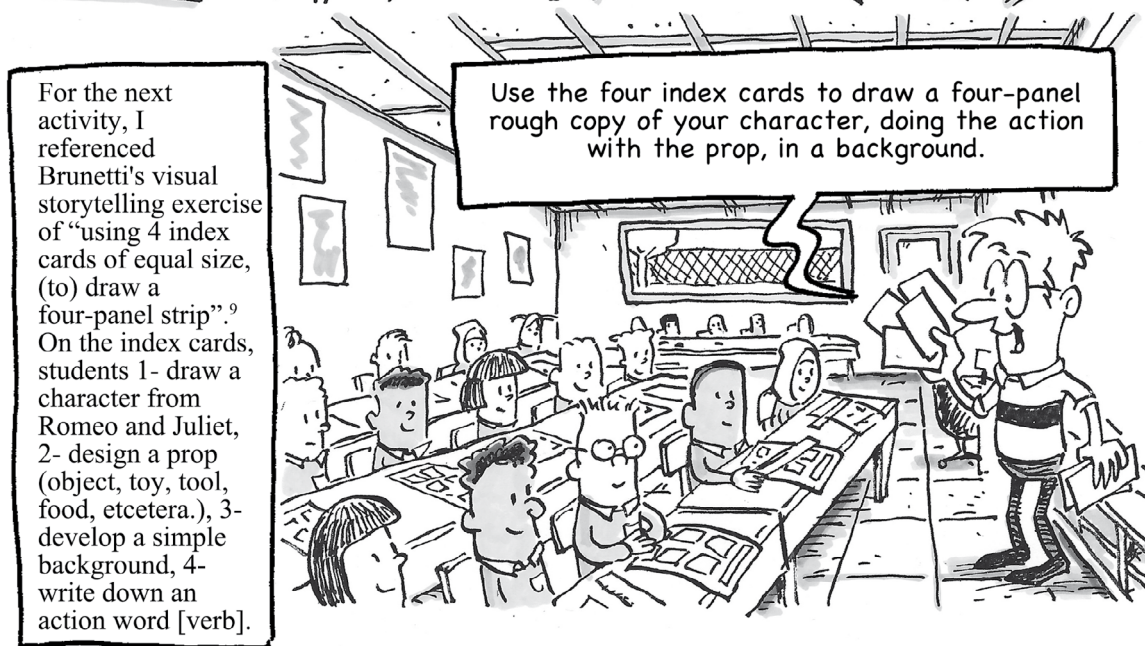
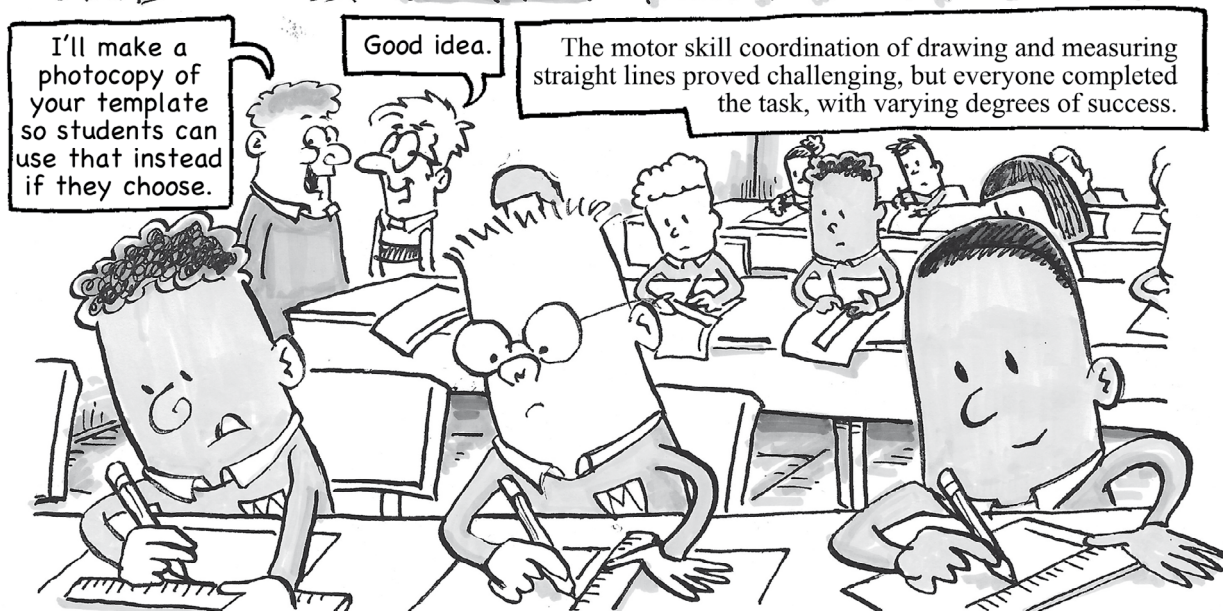
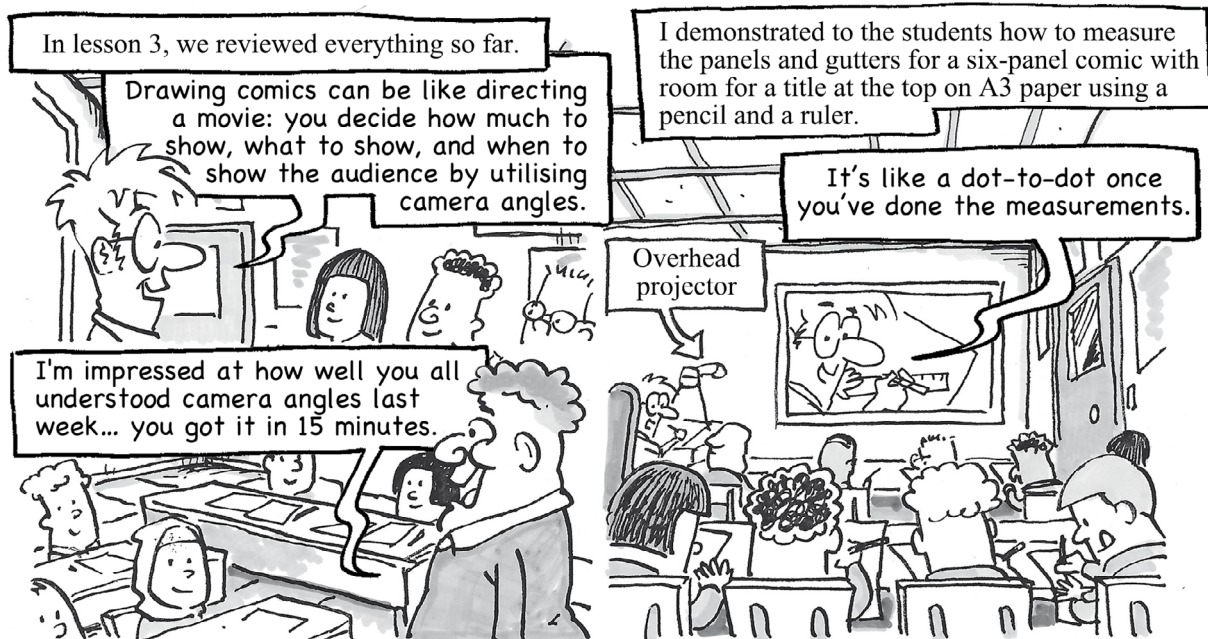
Near the end of the session, Mr. Murray gave the students a deadline.

They were all happy to stay after school and draw comics!



Yaaaaayyyy!





Later in the lesson, I asked the students to add two additional index cards: one at the beginning (or elsewhere) to more clearly communicate the character's motivation, and another card at the end to indicate a consequence or conclusion.

The six index card approach to creating short sequential graphic narratives provides opportunities to move panels around and strengthen the storytelling.

Cartooning as research analysis provides moments of quiet reflection towards new understandings.

My graphic memoir methodology nuances (auto)biography with fictive elements while still inviting the reader to believe rather than suspend belief.

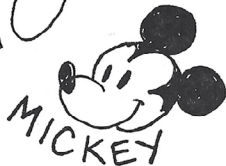
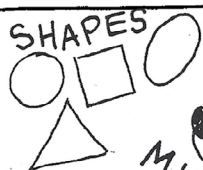
As an academic cartoonist writing personally, graphic memoir provides a powerful and empowering artform and highlights my praxis of comics, collaboration, and pedagogy.

In my analysis of this comics pedagogy project, graphic memoir functions as a versatile research methodology and findings output to tell nonfiction stories through knowledge co-creation within communities of practice.

Graphic memoirist Tom Hart writes "whatever metaphor you use, or whatever function it serves, experience that new growth. Nurture it and release it."¹⁰

Graphic memoir utilises the language of comics to transcend (auto)biographical nonfiction via applications of narrative, visual metaphor, font selection, panel layout, renderings of tone, colour choices, and more.

In the fourth lesson, we briefly reviewed everything we had done so far.

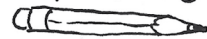


CHARACTER DESIGN



SPEECH BUBBLES!

MATERIALS



SHARING



ASKING QUESTIONS



POSES AND GESTURES



CAMERA ANGLES



PAGE DESIGN

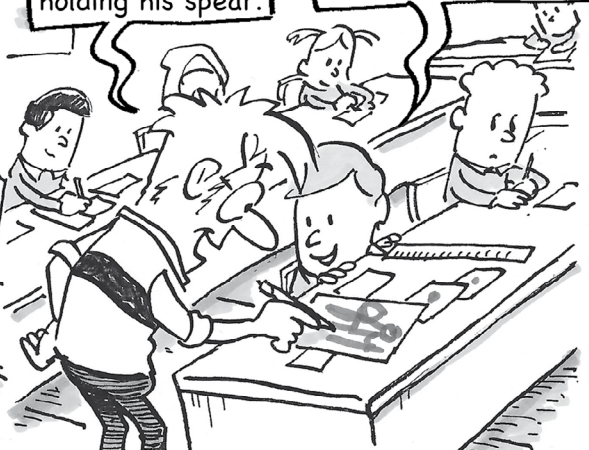
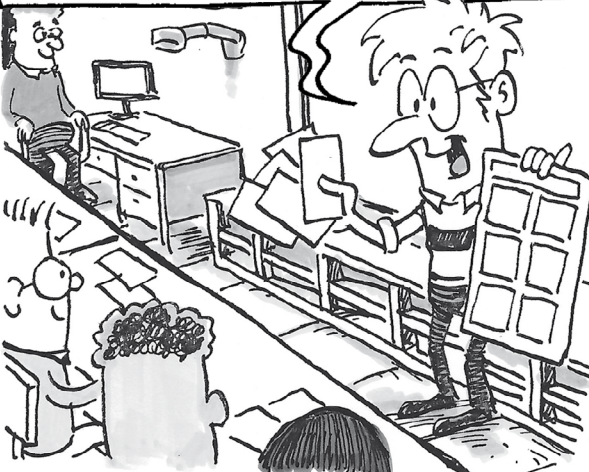
BACKGROUND DESIGN

Your six index cards form your sloppy copy. Now you will redraw, in pencil, your cards into the 6-panel A3 page you measured last week. Design a title at the top. This is your good copy.

One student asked me how to draw a prison guard.

Here's his helmet... he's holding his spear.

I'll use a ruler to make the prison bars in front of Romeo!



Later in the lesson I noticed the student demonstrating to another student how to draw a prison guard.

At the end of the session...

That's his helmet.

Oh!

Great work, everybody.

Continue working on your pencils and we'll start inking next week.

THANK YOU!!



In the final two lessons, we covered inking, block lettering, and title design.

The black fine lining will make your comics clear for printing them into a book.

Papermate
Flair brand,
black and
medium.

Many students were already adept at block lettering and designed decorative titles for their stories.

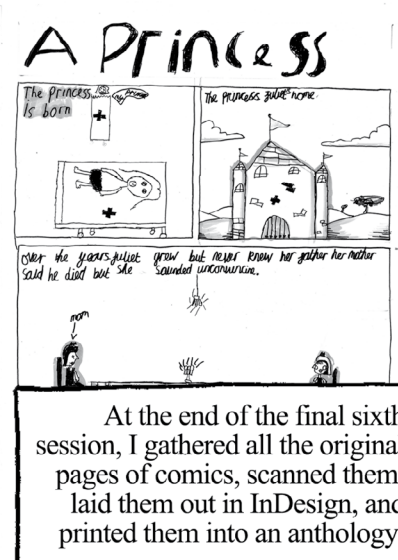
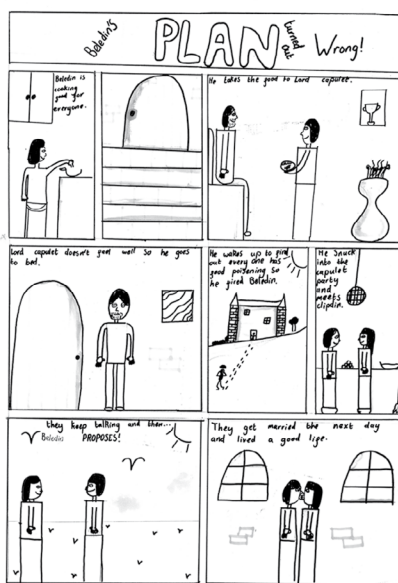
ROMEO the FBI AGENT

Albetta's BIG PLAN

ROSALIND'S REJECTION

MARRIGE GOES WRONG !!!

In between lessons five and six, Mr. Murray brought gray markers and demonstrated to the students ways of applying tone to their inked pages. Here are some example selected panels and page layouts:

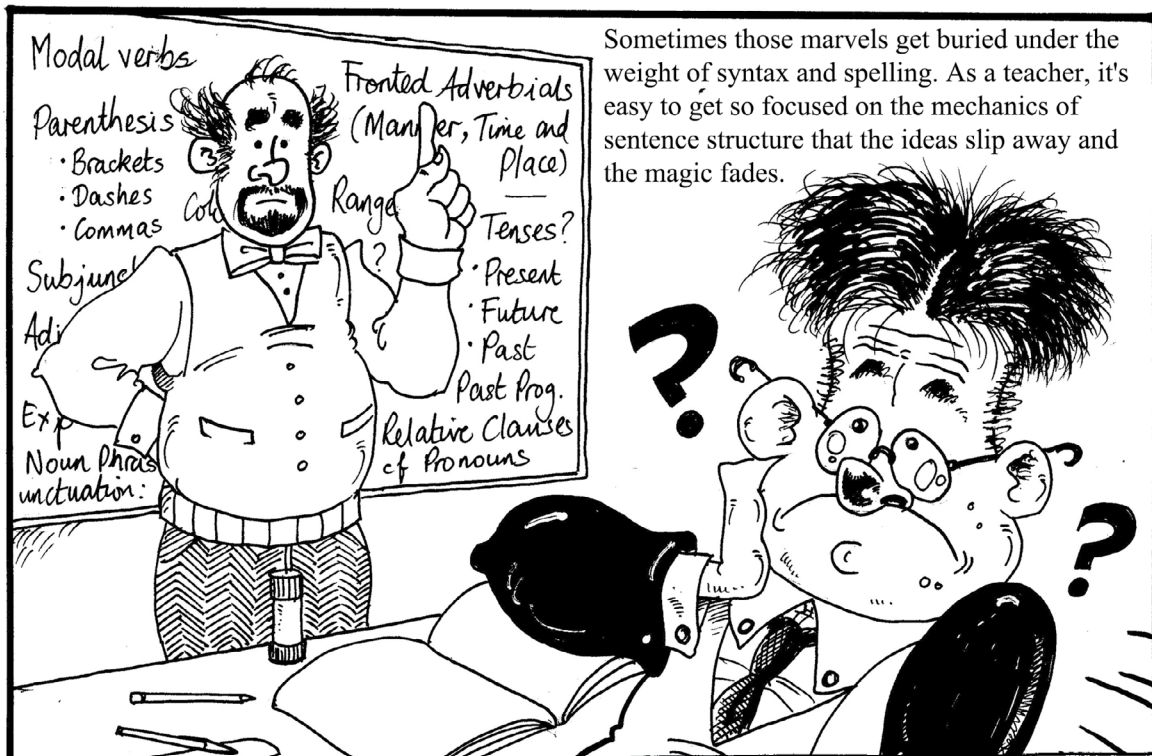


At the end of the final sixth session, I gathered all the original pages of comics, scanned them, laid them out in InDesign, and printed them into an anthology.



Classrooms should be magical places where sparks of creativity and imagination collide to create something magical... Something that no one could have ever predicted.

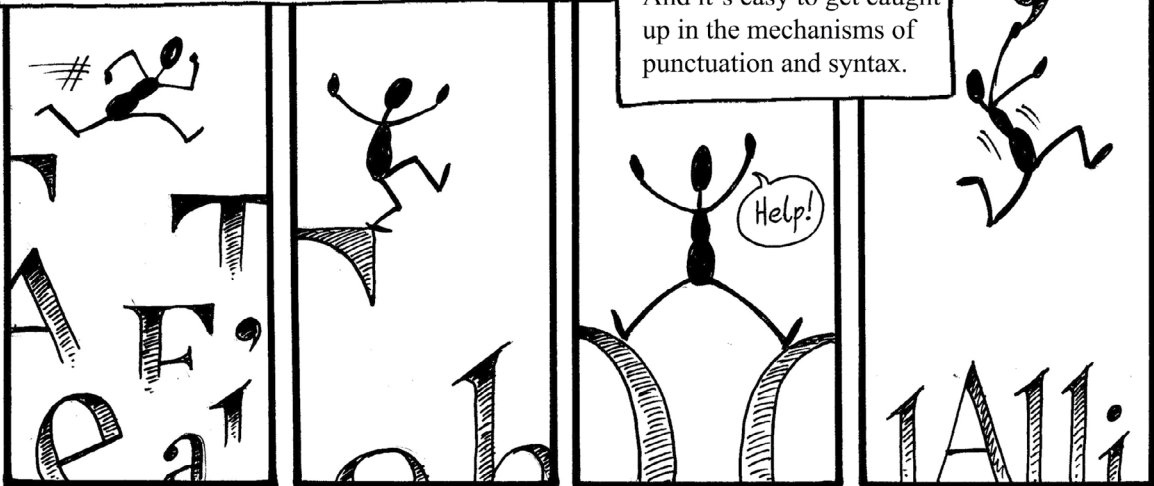
And sometimes they are.



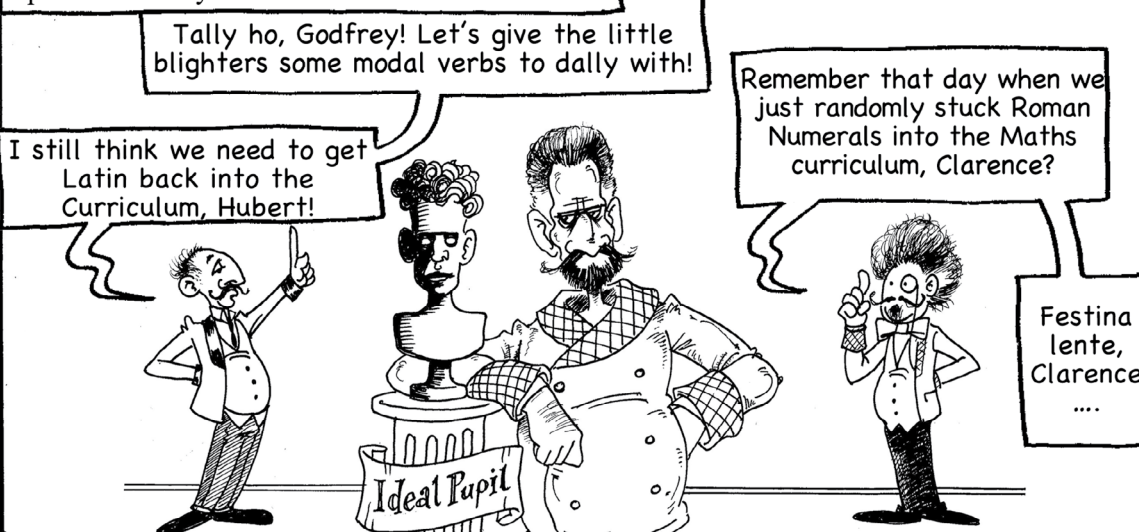
Sometimes those marvels get buried under the weight of syntax and spelling. As a teacher, it's easy to get so focused on the mechanics of sentence structure that the ideas slip away and the magic fades.

It's dangerous to assume pupils can circumnavigate the mechanics of writing that we throw at them! Pupils bursting with thoughts and ideas often find themselves overwhelmed by the technicalities of getting their inspiration out of their heads and on to paper. Difficulties in spelling and vocabulary can leave them struggling to find the right words...

And it's easy to get caught up in the mechanisms of punctuation and syntax.



As a classroom teacher, I often wonder how we got to this point and how the powers that be came up with a literary curriculum which looks like this.



Disclaimer: I have been reliably informed by The People Who Know These Things that this is just an illusion in my head and that the reality is nothing like this at all. I'm not convinced...

End of the year revels! My class were tired, ready for their summer holidays and finding it hard to concentrate. With most of the curriculum finished I had a certain amount of time to play around with the concepts and ideas which Julian Lawrence had introduced us to. What treat could I give my wonderful class to end the year? Could we do a comic strip jam? Every pupil would write and draw one panel of a comic strip, then pass it on to the next pupil, with a five-minute time limit! I started off with an initial starting point: Jimmy – what's his surname? McKelly! What problem does Jimmy have? He's in pain! Ok, but where? His bum! Nope, try again! His belly! Why? It rhymes with McKelly! Ideas for alliteration? Bouncy, bobbly...and so it began.



What did I find? Well, first I found that most pupils have an instinctive understanding of how to tell a story, once a consideration of grammar and syntax have been lifted from their ideas. Pupils might not understand words like equilibrium, external conflict and resolution but instinctively they have an understanding of how to tell stories. We also found that many pupils can think much more easily in images and visual stimulus and that it was worthwhile investing time into working out narratives in a comic strip format before even beginning to think about the vocabulary they would need to write it out in prose.

I believe integrating comics and cartooning into the curriculum provides positive pedagogical impacts thanks to the multimodal learning opportunities that the medium provides. The time has come to teach students and educators ways "to use the form for expressing their own ideas and sentiments, for transmitting their enthusiasm, their own likes and dislikes"¹¹ with comics. With more comics in the curriculum educators can create exciting environments for student learning through the collaborative and "participatory culture"¹² of the medium.

This graphic memoir field study of year 3 primary students finds connections between drawing comics, empowerment through learning, and explorations of authorship and literacy. These findings suggest that incorporating making comics into curriculum performs not only as a measure of reading and writing achievements, but also as a platform for students to develop a voice and claim authorship. The possibility for further studies into the relationships between comics, learning, and empowerment are vast and include the following recommendations:

The goals of this research project involved:

- Investigations into the ways making comics in the classroom empowers students;
- Exploring meaningful methods of integrating making comics into curriculum; and
- Contributing to the growing knowledge of comics research in education.

The possibility for further studies into the relationships between comics, learning, and empowerment are vast and include the following recommendations:

- Comics in the curriculum supports student learning and creativity. Additional research into this area is vital.
- Making comics helped students learn about Romeo and Juliet and demonstrates multimodal visual and written literacies.

In the small number of studies that research the physical and freehand drawing of comics in the classroom, all find positive connections to learning. I have observed an array of successes when comics are integrated into the lessons.

Indeed, the primary students in this study enjoyed participating in learning activities with comics such as narrative storytelling, incorporating new vocabulary, revising texts... and they, and their teacher, would like more.



ENDNOTES

¹ (Brunetti, 2011, p. 25).

² (Jackson, 2020, p. 51).

³ (Pedri, 2015, p. 128).

⁴ (Williams, 2009).

⁵ (Leggo *et al.*, 2011, 247).

⁶ (Pedri, 2015, p. 127).

⁷ (Barry, 2015, p. 94).

⁸ (Lawrence, 2023).

⁹ (Brunetti, 2011, p. 42).

¹⁰ (Hart, 2018, p. 146).

¹¹ (Gruenberg, 1944, p. 207).

¹² (Tilley, 2025).

ETHICS APPROVAL CONFIRMATION

This study received formal ethics approval from the School of Arts and Creative Industries Research Ethics Sub-Committee at Teesside University. The research protocol was reviewed and approved in accordance with the institution's guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Approval Number: 2024 May 22012 Lawrence Approval Date: 03/05/2024

All participants provided informed consent prior to their involvement in the study. The research adhered to principles of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time, in line with the ethical standards set forth by the Teesside University.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests related to the research project. The study was conducted independently, without any external funding, financial support, or influence from commercial organisations. All findings and interpretations presented are solely those of the authors.

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AUTHOR BIOS

Julian Lawrence. PhD (Senior Lecturer Comics and Graphic Novels, Teesside University) is an award-winning artist, researcher, and teacher specializing in comic books. Lawrence employs making comics as both methodology and output through arts-based educational research within contexts of collaborative practice and critical pedagogy.

Roderick Murray. Trained as an illustrator at Leeds Metropolitan University and worked as a freelance cartoonist for several years before gradually moving into a career in teaching where he has worked in the secondary sector, Higher Education and tertiary education before retraining to be a primary school teacher in 2018. He still has ambitions to work for DC Comics before he retires!