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Using comics as a tool to facilitate critical reflective practice in professional education.

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Abstract

This paper reports on the use of comics to help facilitate reflection on one's past as part of an early childhood education degree programme in Spain. It is common in professional education programmes in the health and education fields to encourage students to reflect on their past in order to explore how this has shaped their development and how it has influenced their career decisions. A challenge with more traditional forms of written reflections in this area is that they often become simple descriptions without any critical reflection on past experiences. To address this, the research reported here aimed to explore the extent to which comics had the capacity to afford alternative and novel ways of reflecting on one's past by providing students with the opportunity to create their own comics. Reporting on a sample of the completed comics and the students' reactions to the task, the study found that despite initial reservations and limited experience of comics, the students completed the task to an impressive level. While there was variation in the quality of the completed students' comics, they had utilised many of the unique affordances of comics to reflect their past lives. This paper discusses the implications of integrating comics into reflective practice activities and the challenges and opportunities they pose for practitioners.

Keywords: Reflective practice; autobiographical comics, critical reflection; professional education

Introduction

Reflective practice plays an important role in the professional education of many occupations, particularly within the education and health fields. For example, in the area of nursing education and teacher education, reflective practice has become central to pre-service programmes. There are many reported benefits of reflective practice in education. Perhaps the most significant is that reflection can help students learn from their experiences and improve their practice. This pragmatic approach to reflection as a tool of self-improvement is however only one use of reflection. Another important role of reflection is to enable students to explore their past experiences and to unearth and interrogate the values and assumptions that underpin their actions. This form of critical reflection in education is however a challenging endeavour as there is a tendency for students to simply recall past experiences and not interrogate them beyond a descriptive level (McGarr & McCormack, 2014). Educators are therefore challenged with exploring ways to help students explore past experiences in more novel ways to help them to reflect more critically on their past experiences. This paper reports on the use of comics as a tool in an early childhood education degree programme in Spain to address this challenge. A challenge with more traditional forms of written reflections in this area is that they often become opportunities for student teachers to write about their past in a way that shines a positive light on them, mindful of their teacher educators (Thomas & Liu, 2014). The research reported here aimed

to use the visual capabilities of comics as a reflective task to explore the extent to which comics had the capacity to afford alternative and novel ways of reflecting on one's past. In doing so the study aimed to disrupt the traditional conforming discourses evident in traditional text-based responses to such reflective exercises.

Comics as a tool for reflective practice

In exploring the role of comics in facilitating students' reflective practice it is firstly important to outline what they are and their unique affordances as a form of communication. In relation to a definition, El Refaie (2012) observes that the term 'comics' has been used to describe an entire range of different cultural objects. At their most basic, comics utilise both words and images to convey meaning that neither on their own could achieve (Harvey, 2001) hence they exist at the intersection of the written word and the visual image (Hatfield, 2008). The term 'graphic novel' is also used to describe the comics genre and while there are arguments that they differ from comics (Duncan & Smyth, 2017) they both employ the same techniques. Therefore, it could be argued that both meet Sabin's (1993) definition of 'a narrative in the form of a sequence of pictures with or without text' and as a result the graphic novel could be seen as an extended version of the comic. Comics exist in a range of types. For example, McCloud (1994) outlines a number of types of comics where some utilise both image and text whereas others are exclusively image-based. That being said, while a number of different 'types' of comics exist, as Ogier and Ghosh (2017) note, comics as a medium is a constantly evolving one as writers and artists continue to experiment with the medium. Despite its ongoing evolution, the centrality of the image and its visual aspects remains a defining feature of the medium.

As a form of expression, comics have long been associated with counter-culture and have thus traditionally held a marginal position in terms of how they are seen by the public. Ogier and Ghosh (2017) note for example that they have traditionally been, 'perceived as frivolous, childish reading material, mass-produced on cheap paper for light amusement' (p. 3). However, they are acquiring a greater level of social and cultural acceptance (El Refaie, 2012). This growing acceptance is based on both the increasing expansion of the genre as an artistic form and the recognition of the complexity of the genre. It is now recognised that comics offer a range of semiotic and temporal resources to the comic creator thus offering a unique form of expression. They can also offer engaging and demanding reader experiences as readers are challenged to interpret time-space relationships. They also demand the reader to engage their imagination to fully experience the comics message. For that reason, the deceptively simple first appearance of a comic masks the complex interplay between words and image and the intricate messages they can convey (Ogier & Ghosh, 2017).

Viewed through the lens of reflective practice, comics provide a unique opportunity for students to represent their insights from reflecting on their past experiences. Students can draw on a range of rhetorical resources to express their insights and reflections in ways that more traditional forms of representation struggle to achieve.

In saying that, the extent to which students can utilise this medium as part of a reflective activity has not been extensively explored to date. Teacher education has a traditional of more arts-based methods (Grushka & Young, 2014; Bailey & Van Harken, 2014) and in the area of comics a number of studies have reported on their benefits in higher education (Green & Myres, 2010; Rocamora-Pérez et al, 2017; Tribull, 2017). However, there remains a dearth of research into its use as a reflective tool. With this in mind, this study explored

student teachers' creation of comics to represent their past lives and examine specifically the extent to which they utilised the specific affordances of comics to present their reflections of their past.

Methodology

The study was conducted in a University in central Spain. The participants were pre-service early childhood education student teachers in the first year of study with an average age of 20 years. The 128 students (89% female) were enrolled on a module on media and communication. As part of this module students were provided with tutorials in the area of comics where they were introduced to the language of comics and their communicative affordances. These tutorials were provided by an expert in comics and prepared the students to undertake a comics-related task as part of the module. The task required the students to complete a 16-panel comic (either drawn by hand or using suitable software) representing their lives to date. Part of the purpose of the task was to develop the students' visual communication skills and for that reason the comics task was restricted to images only and not text. While this can reduce the opportunities available to the students to utilise some aspects of the language of comics, such as the juxtaposing of text with images, the task nonetheless provided opportunities for the students to utilise other more visual capabilities of the comics medium.

On completion of the task and after the assessment of the module was complete, the students were invited to participate in the study by 1) agreeing to have their comics included in the study for analysis and 2) participate in a short interview seeking their views of the comics task. Of the 128 students enrolled on the module 118 of the completed comics were suitable for analysis. Having analysed all 118 comics, six comics were selected to highlight how the students had effectively utilised the language of comics to represent and reflect on their past experiences. To select the sample, each of the authors analysed all comics and then met and agreed through discussion on the six comics the best utilised the language of comics. Five of these comics are presented below (the sixth was not included as it was similar to another comic presented below).

In addition to the analysis of their comics, these six students were also interviewed as part of the study to ascertain their views of the task. These interviews were conducted by one of the authors and were audio recorded for transcription purposes and subsequently translated. These interviews were thematically analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis. This paper firstly briefly reports on the six students' interview responses to the task before exploring their specific comics. Following this, their implications for reflective practice in education are then examined.

Research Findings

Students' initial views of the task

When asked to talk about their initial reaction to being told that they would be undertaking a task involving the creation of a comic, there were different reactions reported. For three of the six students their initial reaction to the task was positive. Two of the students (student 1 and 6) had experience of reading comics and identified themselves as fans of the genre. As well as being fans of the genre, they also enjoyed drawing and therefore saw the task as an opportunity to apply their skills. A third student (student 2), while feeling that it was going to

be a challenging activity and that she had no artistic ability, nonetheless looked forward to it as she found drawing a relaxing activity. The other three students reported more negative initial impressions of the task. Student 5 reported the they believed the activity was 'weird and difficult' and similarly student 3 noted that they were astonished as they believed it would be an 'impossible activity'. Student 4 reported being in shock at being asked to do the task as she associated comics with fictional characters and not related to the lives of 'real' people. Her initial shock was however replaced by enjoyment;

I was in shock. I need to make a comic!! I sat down and asked myself, what do I do? I do not know what to do. But then it is true that since I started drawing, I thought, well, I believed I was a bad drawer and the truth is that, I like it, hey!!, I like it!, I like this!.

Yet despite these initial negative first impressions, all students reported that the task was beneficial. In analysing the comments in relation to its value, the comments from the students could be categorised into two areas. The first related to the value of the experience in developing their visual literacy skills. All but one of the students noted the value of the comics task in helping them to gain the confidence to express their thoughts and feelings through visual images, as the following examples highlight;

I think now on it [the comics task] as a very good activity because I think we have learned to communicate in a different way, not only in written format. (student 3)

Just using the images to express what you want to say helped me to express things with images ... (student 4)

I have gained the confidence to portray my feelings with images. ... I can express my feelings better just with images (student 1)

There was also reference to the value of the activity in developing broader skills in interpreting the visual word in which they live;

This course has helped me to be more watchful. For example, I observe the advertisements and analyse the images, the music they use, thinking about what they want to convey to us or in which way they are influencing us. (student 4)

People must infer the meaning of the story told by the pictures, and each person makes it [their] own interpretation [sic]... When you draw you imagine things and you feel that you are expressing them as you think, then the person who observes it will create a story around it. It will be different or equal to that of the author. (student 1)

The second value of the task as reported by the students related to the value of comics task in assisting their reflective thinking. All students reported that the structure of the comics task, and the nature of its visual representation, provided a scaffold to help them map out their reflection. The decisions made in relation to how to visually represent their experiences appears also to have been of benefit;

it helps you to reflect much more in-depth than if you were writing a text. You must think slowly, organise your mind and select the most relevant events of your life, those that have left a mark in your life. (student 6)

It forces you to organise yourself. I had to think about the number of vignettes, and what I wanted to represent in each of them. It helps you to reflect and see those moments of your life that you did not consider important before and once you drew them in a vignette, you realise that your personality has been reflected in the comic (student 4)

Analysing the comics

The second part of the findings involves an analysis of the selected comics. Despite the variation amongst the students in terms of their past experience of comics, this section aims to highlight some examples of specific characteristics of the language of comics that have been utilised by the students in representing their past lives.

Identifying with the reader

A key affordance of the comic medium is the use of more abstract images of people to increase the ability of the reader to identify him/herself with what is being narrated.

McCloud (1993) notes that this abstraction in the image, that he refers to as ‘cartooning’ is a tool which enables the elimination of some details so that other details can be emphasised. This abstraction of the image increases the degree of universality of the central character thus increasing the reader’s identification with the character and story. This abstraction of the central character also increases the reader’s empathy. Therefore, rather than using realistic visual portrayals of people in comics, using more abstract symbolic representations can help the reader identify more with the story. Before exploring the use of this abstraction it is worth noting that the use of the term ‘cartooning’ here should not be confused with traditional notions of cartoons which are generally accepted as being either animated films or ‘humorously intended single panel drawing with verbal caption beneath’ (Harvey, 2001, p. 76).

The comic in Figure 1 makes use of the resource of abstraction as a fundamental element in the narrative. For example, in panel 6, the use of two intertwined human figures allows the author to show how the discovery of friendship played an important role in his life, but more importantly, the abstraction of the image increases its relevance and relatedness to potential readers. Therefore, readers can more readily identify with the challenges of youth represented in panel 9.

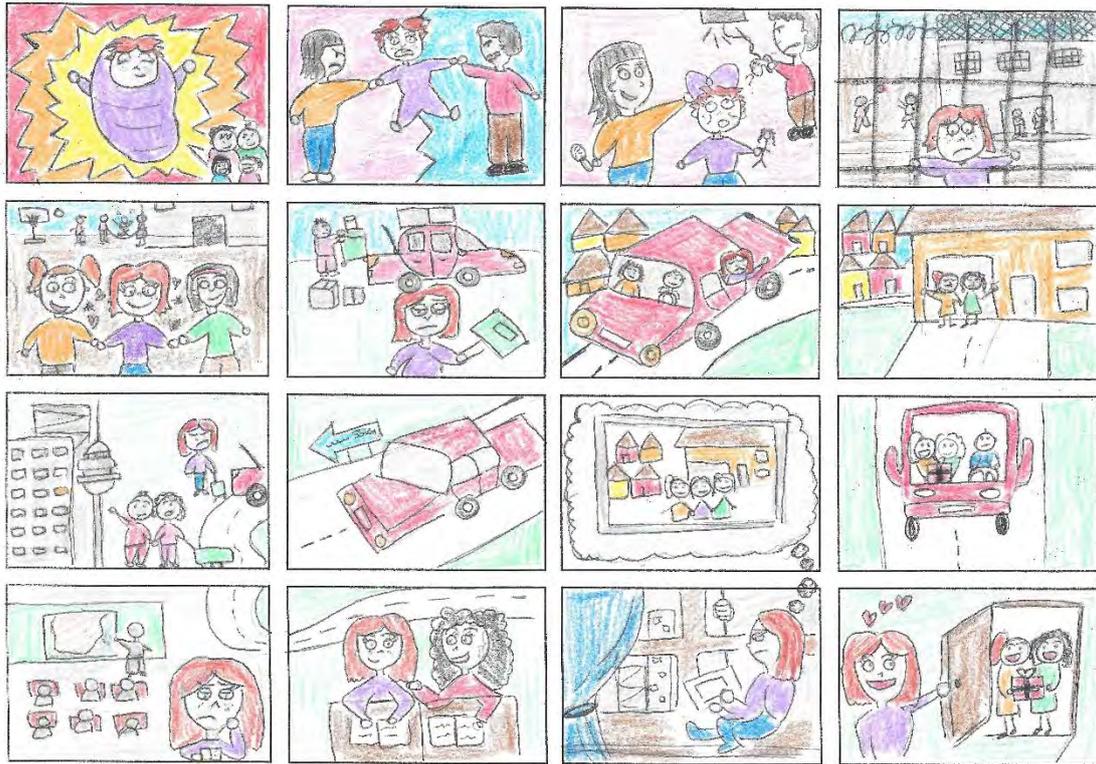


Figure 2. Student comic 2

Challenging temporality

Turning to the issue of temporal sequencing, Fellini (cited in Pintor, 2018) comments that the fixed and strict order of panels can, through the reader's gaze, restore in them the sense of time. In the task undertaken by the students, the ability to play with images to which the reader can breathe life is limited for two reasons. Firstly, the author cannot 'play' with the page composition given the fixed 16-panel structure. Secondly, being a single page comic, the author cannot play with the surprise derived from the page change. However, that does not prevent the use of the potential of the comic medium in several aspects. One of them is the apparent rupture of the linearity of the story that occurs in panels 11 and 15 of figure 2 above. This is made by enclosing the image of panel 11 in a thought bubble to indicate that this image is a memory in the moment in which panel 15 happens. However, it makes perfect sense that this panel is located in that place, because if we ignore the thought balloon, that position is the one that corresponds chronologically. In that sense, it is also interesting the use of the road in panels 7, 9, 10, 13 and 14 that allows, again, to include elements that subvert that temporal linearity of history without breaking it completely. The comic has therefore the possibility of playing with different levels of temporal sequencing. In the case of an autobiography, where the different moments of life follow a linear and interlaced trajectory, this can be subverted and challenged providing an additional level of complexity in the communicative process. Again, this level of complexity in the representation highlights a level of critical reflection on the process.

Varillas (2009) contends that in a comic, what is told (the level of story) is as important as how it is told (the level of discourse). For example, when selecting images, especially where one is limited to 16 panels, a global image must be reconstructed through fragmented images. Therefore, the selection of these fragments is essential for the final communicative goal. In

Figure 3 the global communicative construction is mainly done through the selection of the images chosen to tell the story. For example, three panels (panels 6 to 8) are used to show the moment of the head injury of the protagonist. Allocating three panels (when the author is restricted to 16 panels in total) shows the high importance of that moment in the author's life. The enlargement of the image of the head injury and the emphasis on the associated trauma has been deliberately chosen to highlight the significance of the event. Real time is frozen in these three images giving the reader time to recognize their importance. These difference between the real time and the time of the story is another potential of comics to reinforce the meaning of a specific moment.

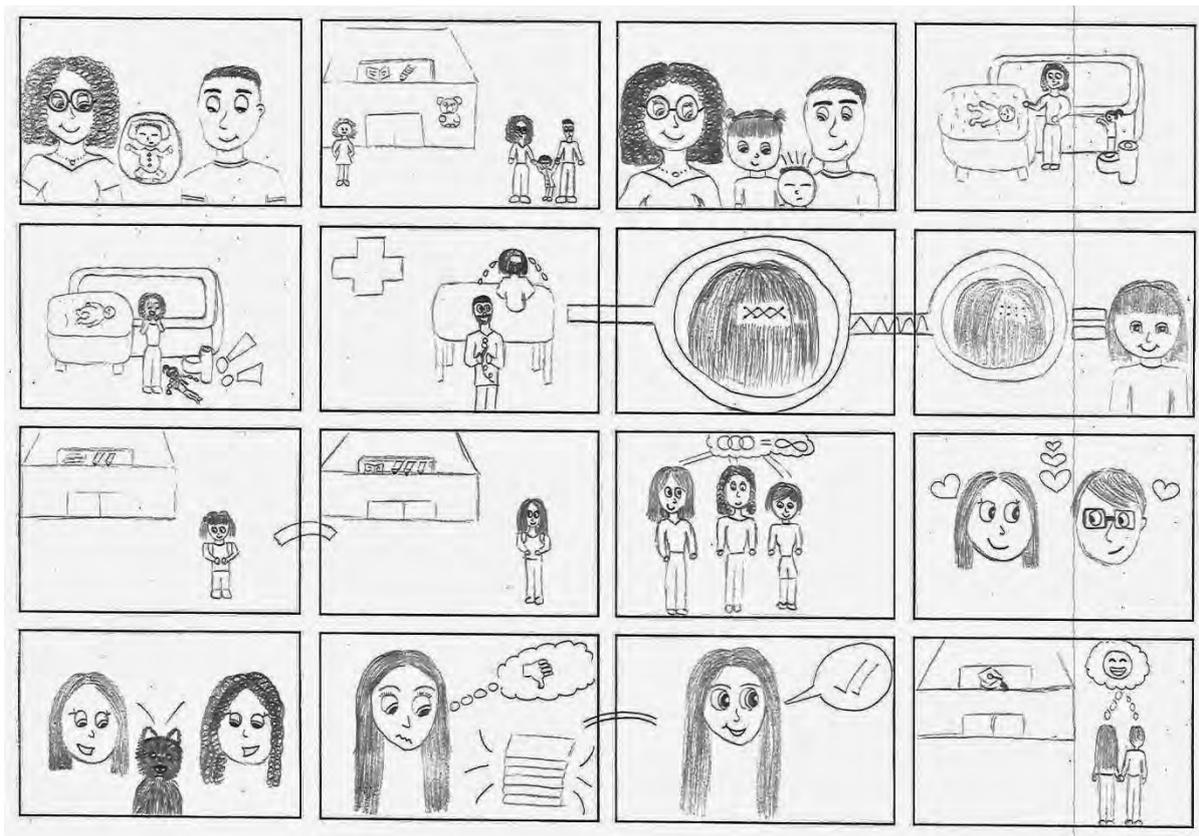


Figure 3. Student comic 3



Figure 4. Student comic 4

Comic 4 draws on another aspect of comics affordances through manipulating the point of view of the images. For example, looking at panels 6 and 7 and focusing on the level of the story, these two panels narrate two moments that could be said to be important in the life of a student, such as the beginning of school and the achievement of the first academic degree. However, in these two panels, and at the level of discourse, the compositional choice of the protagonist's point of view is much more interesting. There is no better way to show the uncertainty associated with the first day of school than to show the character from behind, since it is the reader who builds the image of the character's face. That is, there is uncertainty in relation to the face expression, reflecting perhaps the uncertainty that the protagonist had at that time of her life. In contrast, after graduation, the image is no longer of uncertainty, but of happiness and success, for which the plane used is changed to a close-up where the character's full smile is shown. A face of happiness obtained after a vital process that has allowed the protagonist to overcome the uncertainty shown in the previous moment. Importantly, this process has occurred in the narrow space of the gutter. Hence what is assigned to the gutter is as important as what is presented in the panels. The decision-making process underpinning these decisions again, we argue, highlights a level of critical reflection on one's past.

Presenting subjective experiences

The comic in figure 4 presents many examples of how important the selection of the shot is when transmitting the emotional moments of the autobiography. Specifically, in this case, a very interesting use is made of what, in cinematographic terms, we could call the off-camera. So, for example, in panels 3 and 9, the same resource is used to show adults but leave their face out of the frame. This is achieved, not only to focus the attention on the children who

appear in those panels, but also to show the emotional distance that occurs between children and adults. A distance caused, not only because of the physical conditions derived from the difference in size, something that could be deduced directly from the observation of the images, but also because of the fact that adults, in some aspects, do not belong to the world of children and that is why they largely remain on the periphery of images or in the gutters of the comic. This circumstance is emphasized in panel 3 by the distance that exists between the children's playground and the place from where the adult watches them, in the distance, avoiding the possibility of the two worlds intersecting.

Continuing with the idea of the difference between the level of story and the level of discourse, it is important to consider that this difference can also be represented at a temporal level, an issue that, as we have already seen, is fundamental in comics. Thus, if we focus on the comic in Figure 5, and more specifically on the panels that go from 10 to 13, you can clearly see the ability to show a certain elapsed time. This is achieved through a selection of specific moments drawn from that time that emphasise a cause-consequence relationship between them. One of the greatest potentials of comics is the relationship between continuity and discontinuity of images. Panels 10 to 13 (together with the information provided by panel 7) clearly show us how the gift received on the 18th birthday by the protagonist led to an injury that prevents her from playing volleyball and led to her taking on a refereeing role as a consequence. This highlights the affordance of the comics medium to establish cause-effect relationships through the inter-iconic space between panels. This is what Groensteen (2007) calls 'iconic solidarity' where image acquires its full meaning through its coexistence with the other images within the comic.



Figure 5. Student comic 5

Discussion

From the onset, the paper set out to explore the extent to which comics could be used in the reflective process and specifically in facilitating alternative ways to present past experiences and reflect on them. A challenge with many reflective exercises that require students to reflect on their past lives is that the reflections become essentially descriptions of past experiences with little analysis of these past events (McGarr & McCormack, 2014). Hence it is worth considering the extent to which this comics task provided students with the opportunity to move beyond simply describing their past experiences.

On the one hand, some of the comics created by the students showed that they were used in a simplistic way to present a series of images that described the major points in their lives and there was no utilisation of the language of comics in their presentation. Hence, the comics could be seen as replacing a simple written description of their past lives with a visual description of them. Yet even if this is the extent of the students' output, such a task is nonetheless beneficial as it aids the development of the students' visual literacy skills. As the findings section highlight, this was mentioned by the students in the interview excerpts. In addition, the restriction of the comic to a 16-panel structure also challenged the students to identify what they would consider to be the most significant incidents and turning points in their past lives. Having to make decisions in relation to what to include and exclude and how to visually represent them could potentially act as a catalyst for future reflective thinking.

On the other hand, some students did use the opportunity to utilise the language of comics as highlighted in the examples provided. For these students, the nature of the task challenged them not only to present their past lives but also engage in a level of analysis of their experiences, thus requiring them to make decisions not only on what was presented but also how it was presented. In this way, the students were not simply recalling and *presenting* their past lives but rather *representing* them. This analysis and interpretation highlights the reflective component of the task that extends beyond a mere description of their past experience. It could be said that the act of creating these comics encourages the students' reflective thinking as it commands the student to identify critical incidents, consider their temporal order, the multiple perspectives of these events and the visual way in which they could be presented so that their key messages are communicated. Therefore, having the possibility of playing with the language of comics, considering the way in which significant events are visually portrayed, the iconic solidarity of the images and the information assigned to the comics gutters can act as a catalyst for thinking and reflecting more deeply on one's past lives. For a group of students previously in-experienced in comics design that were provided with training in comics, this study shows that in a relatively short period of time, the language of comics can be mastered effectively, thus opening up this form of communication as a reflective tool in many professional preparation degrees where such autobiographical reflective tasks are required.

In saying that, there are challenges that remain. The first relates to the perception of comics, both within some educational circles and society in general. As the findings highlight, the perception of comics as a childish and trivial form of expression surfaced in this study as evidenced by the students' initial reaction to the task. Therefore, despite El Refaie's (2012) contention that comics are acquiring a level of social and cultural acceptance as legitimate and credible forms of expression and communication, it appears there is a way to go in this regard. That being said, the increasing recognition of the importance of more visual forms of

literacy, and the contribution comics can make in addressing these literacies, is likely to accelerate their acceptance in education into the future.

The second challenge relates to the assessment of comics in the field of reflective practice. Shifting reflections to this more visual form of communication highlights the need to develop new forms of analysis of these multimodal forms of expression so that more critical forms of reflection can be identified within them. As Bateman and Wildfleuer (2014) comment, ‘as the analysis of comics comes increasingly into the focus of scientific attention, accompanying issues of how such analysis can be reliably performed raise themselves with growing urgency’ (p. 374). Without such guidelines there is a possibility that the reader (and assessor) of such reflective exercises may be unable to identify the performativity aspects prevalent in many students’ reflections where the student appeases the assessor by reflecting on issues they believe are important to the assessor rather than their own practice. Effective use of the unique language of comics may camouflage this performativity element and hence one’s command of the language of comics may become what is being assessed - rather than the complexity of the reflection it is constructed to portray. For example, the student may utilise techniques to increase the universal appeal of their autobiographical comics, in order to appeal to the assessor’s empathy towards their past experiences. In addition, the omission of detail from comics, and strategically assigning certain experiences and time periods to the comics gutters can also be a convenient way to bypass more complex and problematic elements of one’s past that merit exploration and interrogation. Further still, experiences assigned to gutters may be placed there on the basis that the omissions are self-explanatory. In these cases, this may show evidence that the students have not reflected on the assumptions underpinning the recollection of their past lives. Not recognising that many of their assumptions may be socially determined and hence the norms of their lives that they take for granted are not universally experienced by others, could be seen as evidence of a lack of critical reflection on their past. For that reason, while such comics are hugely powerful forms of expression, and we argue can greatly assist the reflective process, what is perhaps also required in such presentations is a justification and rationale for their content by the student, otherwise there is a possibility that the assessor may project meaning and significance to elements of the students comics beyond the original intention of the creator.

A further potential limitation of the comics medium as a reflective tool may relate to the difficulty of the author to portray challenging aspects of their past lives such as neglect, abuse or trauma. It may well be that the absence of such elements within the comics is not due to the students trying to present their past lives in a positive manner as possible but instead reflects their inability to express these challenging experiences in a visual way. That being said, as part of the training the students received in their preparations to undertake the task, they were provided with examples of a diverse range of comics and their expressive capabilities. This may suggest that both the novel task of creating comics and their need to present their past in a positive light may have equally influenced the nature of the students’ comics.

Conclusion

Moving towards more powerful forms of communication and expression in reflective practice brings enormous opportunities and, as this paper has highlighted, comics are a particularly good medium in this regard. The study has highlighted that despite initial reservations and limited experience of comics the students completed the task to an impressive level. While

there was variation in the quality of the completed artefacts, the sample of work highlighted here shows that the students had utilised many of the unique affordances of comics to reflect their past lives. In saying that, one must be careful that the novelty of this medium (particularly in professional fields that have not traditionally utilised them) does not result in assumptions of innovation by virtue of their use alone. Rather than critically reflecting on their past, there is every possibility that students would use the language of the comics to conform to socially accepted understandings of recalled events and carefully construct accounts to appease the assessor. In these cases where little critical reflection has occurred in the realisation of the comic, can the educator recognise this within the completed artefact? What is being assessed in this context, the students' command of the language of comics or their ability to use this language to reflect critically on their lives and communicate this visually? Such differences may appear subtle but are quite significant. Notwithstanding the value of comics in encouraging critical reflection, further research is required to explore this particular aspect.

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