

Methods for Change

Thinking Through Comics

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Thinking Through Comics is a versatile methodology which involves integrating the process of comic-making into the doing of research at different stages. It is a growing field and is occasionally called 'comics-based research' (see Kuttner et al. 2021).

Comics can be described as a combination of text and image, often contained in panels, which are juxtaposed in a sequence to tell a story. The interplay between text and image, panels within and across pages, and the telling of multiple stories means comics are also sophisticated structures with potential for anyone embarking on an inquiry. However, because of their association with popular culture and younger audiences, comics are often used by researchers at the end point of research to communicate ideas to non-academic audiences. Thinking Through Comics, in contrast, situates the comic as a way of thinking throughout the research process: from the collection of data to its analysis and the presentation of findings. Thinking through Comics and doing research are therefore concurrent activities. This methodology entails two stages: firstly, setting out with the frame of a comic-making in mind at the beginning of any data collection. Starting this way leads to the collection of particular kinds of materials, materials that in the first stage share much in common with other research methodologies. For example, visual materials such as photographs, film and drawings. In the second stage, it involves using the mechanisms of comics as a mode of thinking through, and with, the materials collected. Merging data collection and analysis with comic book praxis has the potential for distinct perspectives and insights into experience, interaction, environments and processes. At these stages, it can either be the researcher, the participants, or a collaborating artist who is making a comic book. The comic books can also be made through a variety of different modes: drawing, collaging, or through online programmes.



How does Thinking Through Comics create or contribute to change?

Thinking Through Comics and experimenting with research materials leads to changes in perception and perspective toward persons, groups and organisations by making visible previously hidden emotions, attitudes, and experiences. This change happens for researchers in the process of coming to understand and analyse their material and for the users/audience of the research, including participants in the research process itself. The process of making a comic is a tool to analyse and present the perspective of individuals or groups, or to tell a story from their world view. The immersive and multimodal nature of comics means that making and reading a comic brings the reader into experiencing and understanding someone else's world. Devices such as emanata (visual symbols emanating from a character that convey that character's feelings e.g. sweat drops for anxiety) show emotions. This depiction intersects with what a person is seen doing (the visual action in the panel), what they are saying (speech bubble), and what they are hearing (other speech and textualized sound). There may also be an additional layer to a story taking place, at the same time, in narrative captions. It is this multiplicity of insights, perspectives and layers on one event, or topic, that can bring about change, revealing previously invisible attitudes, emotions and tensions.

Comic books which figure in research analyses promote and allow engagement with materials and findings in an immersive and playful manner. They offer an alternative way to share complex insights and perspectives. There is an aesthetics to the comic (as opposed to survey findings or interview transcript extracts) which encourages access, interest, and pleasure, making them an excellent medium through which to communicate research findings.

For participants in the research process, it changes their position too. They become tellers of their own stories and shape how they, their communities and their places will be visually represented. When participants are involved in the research process and in thinking through comics, that process becomes more accessible, less wordy, more playful; it can promote comfort and encourages them to share difficult ideas and the problems they face.

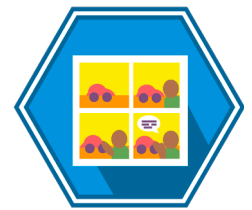


What are the ideas or concepts that influence this approach?

In the Anglo-American world, comics have long been associated with children, comedy and super-heroes. Over the last few decades, a quiet revolution has been taking place in comic culture, one which is putting it in tune with comics in other parts of the world. There, they are a form equally associated with literary fiction, transmitting craft skills and with undertaking research projects. Thinking through Comics in our work has emerged from the intersection of ethnography, visual methods, conversation analysis and the transcription process. It has also emerged from a growing appreciation for the comic form and what it achieves when brought into the realm of research.

Ethnography's imperative is 'being there' and relies on the situated self of the researcher; it aims to recreate the lived experience of others as seen through the reflexive lens of the ethnographer. It is about telling stories or crafting a narrative about peoples' everyday lives. However, these aspects are often represented through text. Visual methods or materials such as drawing, film and photography are often discarded because publishing conventions and communication practices prioritise the written word. Comics' sequential and multimodal mechanisms assemble an array of those visual media for representing situations, scenarios, and solutions to problems. For ethnographic studies, the visual and spatial world is vital, as are how people/objects/animals move in, and through, particular environments. Comics are a versatile and inclusive way of thinking through these relationships.

Additionally, conversation analysis has a core concern with how we organise not just talk, but all kinds of interactions, through taking turns. The speech bubbles and the sequential visual narrative of a comic book fit neatly with a traditional focus on talk, while enabling further insights into the visual appearances of people, things and places, we make, and that make us, through our interactions with them.



Why might I want to use Thinking Through Comics?

- This is a powerful methodology of analysis and representation if you are interested in how specific kinds of individuals or groups experience the world. For example, what it might feel like to inhabit spaces or places as a person with a particular health condition (anxiety, autism, epilepsy) or how children experience environments such as school or parks.
- If you have case studies, problems, or designs where the timing, layout and/or step-by-step dimensions are important, comics are a prime methodology. They allow you to represent and think about what is next, where things come from and go to. For example, if distant or immediate pasts, or imagined futures, are important to your research, comics help you lay these elements out.
- If you are interested in the way people act, react, or respond to certain situations within an organisation, comics can help explain or envisage such processes. What are the steps of decision making, for example? How will staff and users react to specific changes, and what alternatives can be imagined?
- If capturing sense of place is important to your investigation, then the multimodality of comics and comic-making offers you more ways of doing so. How do employees experience a new office building, or students a particular library or educational environment? How might this approach inform design and planning decisions?
- Perhaps you are transcribing interviews or naturally occurring activities and do not want to eliminate the visual, spatial, environmental and temporal aspects. Or, relatedly, if you are exploring the relationship between what is said and the context in which it is said.
- If you are collaborating with communities as a form of participatory research, rather than output. Comic book making helps reveal choices, thought processes, perceptions, and perspectives. It draws on and helps teach a wider variety of skills through the comic-making process: drawing, photography, caption writing, verbal-image interface, design etc. In this sense, comics-making is employed in a similar way to participatory filmmaking.
- If you want to make information, instructions and ideas more accessible to audiences, comics as both process and output work effectively as pedagogical or instructional materials. Their familiar form, their visuality and their sequential nature invite us to share information, instructions or ideas in ways that both tell and show audiences what our message is.



Step by Step Guide to using Thinking Through Comics

- 1. Collecting:** The first step involves the researcher gathering data for their project and discussing with participants what it is that they want to share. Some of this might be verbal material, such as stories they tell you, observation notes or written feedback but there might also be visual data, for example, photographs, video clips, social media images, and more. We would encourage you to widen what you search for and collect.
- 2. Auditing:** Examine the empirical materials. There are those we have noted above but do not rule out statistical tables, pie charts, diagrams, or workflow charts. The comic form is open to almost any medium. In pinning materials onto the wall when working with participants for example, you will begin to have a sense of what might follow what, what contrasts with what. If you already make slides for talks and are used to thinking in sequences of slides, use sequences which bring together visual and textual materials.
- 3. Collaborating:** This optional third step is to find a visual artist to work with. Illustrators, graphic designers and other visual artists can bring a different perspective and set of skills and different ways of engaging with participants. They also call upon you to explain your ideas and respond to them.
- 4. Producing:** Thinking Through Comics calls upon you and your participants to engage with new resources, find a voice and begin to analyse research materials. In terms of tools. This might be A4 paper and a black pen or digital tablets with drawing apps:
- 5. Experimenting:** Begin by using and trying out the many components of comic books. The elements which are available are: panels, gutters (the gaps between them) and page layout. Play with whole-page splash-panels, small square boxes, or larger landscape panels. Try out making comics with just photos or objects or pie charts. Consider how to show characters, such as research participants, the researchers, the authors etc. Have fun with speech bubbles, captions, motion lines, emanata, and onomatopoeic terms (the 'Ssss' of rustling leaves).
- 6. Developing one style:** Having suggested you try out the full range of features, the next step is then to consider how to use each one and why. What is it that they are enabling you and your participants to do, or show, or capture? Speech bubbles, for example, can be for reporting what others have said, just as quotes within reports and research papers are. They can be for rhetorical dialogues in which you make your argument as a question and answer, or, contrasting opinions between narrators. At a certain point you need to settle on these style rules for each comic that you make.
- 7. Analysing data:** When you bring the comic book form up against empirical materials, what do you find in them? What does it show that couldn't be seen before in words alone? Or, for things that you could already find and show - what can you show more concisely and more accessibly? You can use them to slow or break a process down, finding its hidden complications across several panels.



- 8. Cutting:** You may have the idea that comics provide more room for including images directly of places, objects, dialogue, and characters. However, in Thinking Through Comics, you will discover that is only partly true because they impose considerable concision on you and your participants. Decisions will need to be made regarding what you leave out.
- 9. Characterising:** Finally, comics bring new ways of representing people and places. There are wider discussions to be had around this than we can make. To hint at them here, they are the issues that are part of your project and may be about: democratic voices, organisational roles, everyday moralities, cultural marginalisation and more. One specific tip we offer: you should have ethical guidelines for your project. You need to consider how your agreements on anonymity or identification, or compositing individuals require you to decide how participants or secondary data with subjects in it, appear. Popular apps like Comic Life allow you to use a variety of filters which alter the appearances of images. If you are drawing or working with an illustrator anonymisation is straightforward. The more challenging issue may be if your research participants wish to retain their identity and this is where you would want to work with them concerning how they are depicted.



Examples of Thinking Through Comics in social science research:

Documenting distancing practices in the UK during the COVID Pandemic

Eric's earliest, and continuing, research practice with comics is using them as graphic transcripts of video recordings to show non-verbal aspects of interaction. In fact, the example below involves no talk whatsoever, yet the people within it are accomplishing a passage past one another, a passage which was at the heart of public safety (and anxiety) during the COVID pandemic.

Researchers:

Eric Laurier, University of Edinburgh; Maghnus Hannam, Saul Albert and Liz Stokoe, University of Loughborough

Research on Language & Social Interaction is a scholarly research journal which has an accompanying blog aimed at reaching wider readerships. Eric had posted a multi-part social media thread on walking practices during the lockdown which had attracted attention there. Pedestrians were asked to keep a safe distance of ideally 2 metres or more from one another to prevent the airborne transmission of the COVID virus. The journal asked for a blog post based on the social media thread. Three other researchers who had been posting on the same thread became involved, one bringing secondary video data from a street corner camera recordings. The ambition of the blog post was to intervene in the debate about new rules for how we move through public space.

The comic's part in the blog's intervention was to transcribe in an accessible way the video data to foreground the new COVID pedestrian practices emerging in public space. These practices had become morally loaded, encounters of both cooperation and conflict. The ambition of Eric and the authors was to contribute to that debate by documenting what these new pedestrian practices were in their details and the varied practical problems facing pedestrians and how they solved them.

In thinking about how pedestrians were producing 'social distance' during the COVID pandemic, Eric and three other researchers initially examined hours of the video recordings of a street corner.

The transcriptional comic process required Eric and the other researchers to catch and document what the exact layout was of the streetscape and how it inscribed rules on to the urban fabric via pavements, road lines etc. In trying to find an image of when pedestrian noticed one another and changed trajectory (or not) the authors were drawn into focusing on just when they did and why. In the comic transcript the authors also used coloured annotations to help then direct the reader's attention to the figures. The authors could then help readers notice how the red circled pedestrian had given the pedestrian highlighted with a yellow square an extremely wide berth.

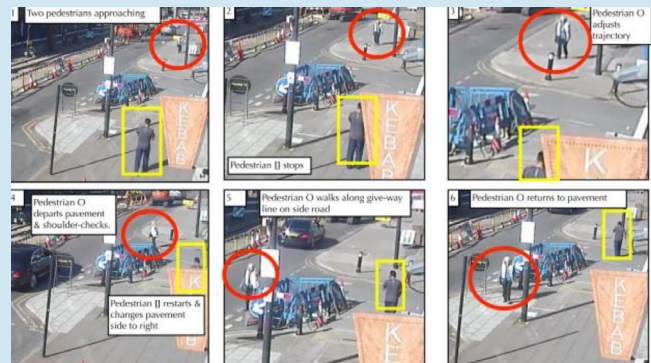
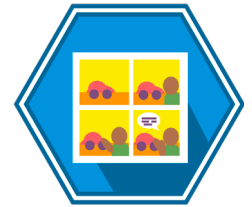


Figure 1: images taken from walking in the time of COVID 19 blog by Eric and the wider team: <https://rolsi.net/2020/05/05/guest-blog-walking-in-the-time-of-covid-19/>

The transcript sits within the blog where the authors described and explained at greater length the pedestrian interactions involved. To provide a hint of that here: How it happens as a new mobile practice is in the sequence of walking moves that are themselves visually and non-verbally organised in public space. The 'Square' pedestrian is, for the 'Circle' pedestrian demonstrably engaged in talking on their phone in the first panel. Circle can also project that Square's slow walking will take them beside the roadworks equipment that is blocking the road. In panels 4 and 5, circle then makes their way around the obstacle and in doing so maintains the contemporary COVID safe distancing.



Interview analysis and vignette construction

Researcher:

Shari Sabeti (University of Edinburgh), part funded by the United Kingdom Literacy Association. Published in 2018 as *Creativity and Learning in Later Life: An Ethnography of Museum Education*. London: Routledge.

Whilst carrying out an ethnography of a museum-based creative writing class, Shari collected a range of materials: postcards of art works, photographs, and drawings of her own and others', participants' creative writing, as well as field notes and interview transcripts. She wanted to use as much of this material as possible to tell the story of her research, so she decided to think about it through comics. One of the ways in which she did this was to use a comic-making programme to bring her varied research materials together to give a multi-sensory and evocative account of one of the interviews she conducted with a participant. This meant that she was able to include how the participant (and the researcher) experienced the museum space and the conditions of the interview itself. It also meant that the interviewee's past and present feelings – the switches back and forth in time - could be represented (and analysed).

You can see in the above comic panels that different layers of narrative work can be used simultaneously to produce a rich evocation of the interview and exchange. The transcription and analysis of the data collected which may be used to create in-depth, nuanced understandings in the form of a vignette work here on a visual level (photographs, drawings, hand-written text) to tell a story. There are also several verbal narratives at work: extracts from the interview, captions which represent some aspects of the researcher's thoughts and positionality, as well as the place of meeting. One of the major insights of approaching the analysis through the comics frame was seeing how the participant's creative process was full of temporal shifts in perspective, something that fed into the poetry she eventually wrote about the exhibition.

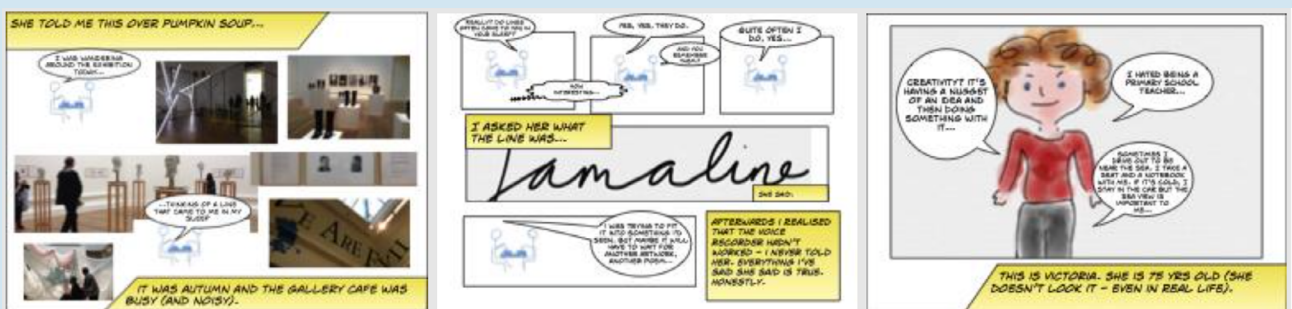


Figure 2: Images taken from *Creativity and Learning in Later Life: An Ethnography of Museum Education*, <https://sites.ecc.ed.ac.uk/comicpraxis/characters/shari-sabeti/research-dilemma/experiment-1-victorias-lines/>



Using comics-making as data collection and co-production.

Researchers:

Shari Sabeti (University of Edinburgh),
Simon Grennan

Thinking Through Comics is particularly effective when you are seeking the views of younger people. As part of a project which aims to make graphic novel adaptations of the work of the Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson for use in school classrooms, Shari has been working with artist and co-researcher, Simon Grennan. In order to involve the young audience from the start, Shari and Simon co-designed a series of comics-making workshops with schools in Scotland and in the Pacific islands of Hawai'i and Sāmoa, so that they could better understand the kinds of texts and representations that would appeal. How do these young people imagine the nineteenth century in which Stevenson's stories are set? What can they make out of cutting up and re-purposing nineteenth century magazines? How would they draw (and colour) characters of different racial backgrounds? How do they begin, sequence, and end a story using only images? Collaging and comics-making activities over several days helped reveal the students' thought processes, their knowledge of the past, and their visions of the present.

This is in the process of being incorporated into the graphic adaptations.



Figure 3: Top: Charisma Kuang; Bottom: Charlotte Mah Yuen. Robert Louis Stevenson School, Apia, Sāmoa

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Where else could Thinking Through Comics be used?

Comic strip making workshops can be employed for training purposes, as well as for co-producing ideas with practitioners. The step-by-step process of putting together a comic is particularly helpful for teaching those whose work involves embodied actions. A good example of this is organisations training assistance dogs and their trainers (see Jamie Arathoon's work below). The generation of comic strips constitutes part of the training process itself, but it also generates material for further training workshops and provides a focal point/resource for conversations with other trainees.

Another potential use for Thinking Through Comics is in healthcare settings for communicating patients' perspectives. Sarah Lippett's "A Puff of Smoke" is a graphic novel which documents her experiences as a child with a rare disease of diagnoses and treatment. It features in training for medical practitioners.

Co-producing materials allows researchers to think through what's working and what's not working in their interactions with their clients, patients or customers. Thinking Through Comics is about engagement as much as the accessibility of the materials. Comics are good for engaging research with and into the day-to-day practices of these organisations.

Top tips

- You do not need to be an artist to use this method. Most of us have lost confidence in our capacity to artistically depict things, yet once you do put pencil to paper you may quickly find you have your own original ways of drawing. Drawing can be part of the thinking process, as well as an outcome (see Barry 2014 and Brunetti 2007).
- Look at examples of 'serious' comics, especially documentary comics. Well known pieces are Joe Sacco's books Palestine and more recently indigenous struggles in Paying the Land, Alison Bechdel's autobiographical Fun Home which re-examines her father's sexual identity and the part it played in her childhood and later life.
- Identify the visual elements of your sector/job/activity. These range across from the screens of devices; the layout of workplaces; who can see what from where; who wears what and more. It is common practice to photograph and/or video places, people, practices and objects and then work from those images.
- Don't use the image to illustrate the words, use it to show different things and more things. If a different story is told when you take the words away, then you really are starting to think with and through the comic form.
- Use icons like hairstyles or coloured spectacles or clothes to help make people recognisable as the same person panel-to-panel yet think about what more that icon represents. While it may seem obvious that in the graphic comic 'Maus', the Germans were cats and the Jews were mice, for Art Spiegelman these cartoon representations of the two groups were tied to the deliberate and harmful depiction of Jewish people as animals in Nazi propaganda produced during the 1930s and 40s.



Further reading

- Barry, L. (2014) *Syllabus*, Drawn and Quarterly.
- Beauchard, D. (2006) *Epileptic*, Jonathan Cape
- Bechdel, A. (2006) *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, Vintage
- Brunetti, I. (2007) *Cartooning: Philosophy and Practice*, Yale University Press.
- Sacco, J. (1996) *Palestine Fantagraphics*
- Spiegelman, A. (1991) *The Complete Maus*, Pantheon Books
- Ware, C. (2012) *Building Stories*, Pantheon Books
- Website documenting the Comics as Research collaboration at the University of Edinburgh <https://sites.eca.ed.ac.uk/comicpraxis/>
- Website with a short film where Shari and Eric discuss what it means to use comics in research for the Scottish Graduate School of Social Science <https://sgsss.ac.uk/methods-resource/visual-methods-and-comics/>

To reference:

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