

*And Gladly Teach***Drawn by Hand: Community College Students as Graphic Novelists**

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Because it's a very slow medium, [a] labor intensive medium.—François Mouly (quoted in Chute,
Outside the Box 189)

In the graphic memoir “Caged,” the author depicts the arrest, imprisonment, and deportation of her undocumented father by ICE and the devastating impact of these events on her family. In one key scene, the author D. visits her father in prison. In a speech balloon, D.’s father asks, “How’s Mami and Giberito? How are you *mija*?” but the reader can already see from her face that she is despondent. Her eyes are downcast, and a tear slides down her cheek. She is silent but for her sniffing, indicated by a sound effect. The rough, scribbled linework in this scene suggests a sense of frightened urgency. An ominous, murky smudge of darkness surrounds father and daughter and creates a claustrophobic atmosphere. A single color emerges from the gloom: the orange of his prison jumpsuit. The author explains, “One relevant motif in this narrative is my father’s uniform and the use of color for his uniform was intentional, . . . I wanted the intended audience to see the importance of my father’s uniform and ID number to me.” Most significantly, she draws herself in one panel and her father in the facing panel, divided by the gutter (the empty space between panels). Reflecting on this choice, D. emphasizes, “Another important element was the gutter; it represents the separation between me and my father.” What is more, the accompanying caption is cut in two by the gutter: “Even though I sat [at] the same table / as my Dad, I was not allowed to / touch his hands. I never felt so / sad.” The author’s use of the gutter to separate the figures and divide her narration underscores her frustrated yearning to connect across the breach. To evoke her family’s pain and bear witness to the plight of the undocumented, she combines formal elements like page composition, color, character design, expressive linework, and text.

“Caged” was not created by a professional cartoonist, but by a community college student with little prior training in art or creative writing.¹ I teach a sophomore-level English elective on the graphic novel at Eugenio María de Hostos Community College (CUNY), an urban public community college that serves the South Bronx. The course culminates with a creative final project that asks students like D. to author their own graphic narrative² and an accompanying

artist's statement. Students in the class have drawn Black princesses with superpowers, a planet inhabited by letters of the alphabet, and an “annoying slice of toast” that learns to be a better friend. They have shared remarkably poignant personal stories: a humorous day in the life of a single mother, a harrowing escape from political oppression in Eritrea, and a dizzying portrait of social anxiety. On the melancholy map that student G. draws of his childhood in the Dominican Republic, his father is located in a bar on one side of the island and his mother in a hospital on the other. In her comic book titled “I Kicked Cancer’s @\$\$!” C. depicts herself as a boxer in the ring standing victorious over her adversary, breast cancer. Another student’s episodic meta-memoir “The Struggle”—drawn on his tablet while he worked as a night watchman—portrays his false starts and comical methods of procrastination on this assignment.

To foster students’ understanding of the possibilities and challenges of graphic narrative, it is only fitting to place the tools of the genre in students’ hands. Some students are excited about this prospect, but many are apprehensive because they doubt their artistic ability. However, the goal of the assignment is not to demonstrate artistic proficiency, but to demonstrate knowledge of the genre through purposeful deployment of its unique formal elements and thoughtful explanation of those choices in their artist’s statement. What is not measurable, but what is meaningful about the project for students, is the immersive and ruminative experience of composing their graphic narrative, which leads not only to greater appreciation of the genre but a deepened self-knowledge. Community college students are remarkably diverse in the experiences and perspectives they bring to the classroom, but it is fair to say that their lives are precarious, busy, and full of competing obligations.³ Many students take a full course load while working one or more jobs and caring for family. Finding time to focus on their work in a deep and sustained way can be a considerable challenge. In spite of these difficult conditions, many community college students view higher education as a gateway to economic stability and career opportunity, often via workforce development and professional certification programs. In this context, making their own graphic narratives challenges and expands community college students’ preconceptions of what higher education can offer. The slow, deliberative process of depicting their own stories using the visual vocabulary of comics compels the kind of meditative immersion and self-realization that is a hallmark of a liberal arts education.

Background Context

In 2014, I was approached by a faculty member from our college’s digital design program who knew of my interest in the visual arts. He encouraged

me to design a literature course about graphic novels that would appeal to art and design students. As I developed the course, I was intrigued by the idea of helping art and design students become more sophisticated readers and writers through graphic novels. Although I was originally inspired to create the course for design students, I have been gratified to find that students across disciplines have enrolled each semester. The creative assignment has been integral to the course design since the pilot run, but it has taken many semesters to refine the assignment to foster greater student success. With the support of our college's Writing Across the Curriculum program, I piloted the course in 2015 as a Writing Intensive-designated elective, and with the support of our Campus Honors program, I have been able to teach an Honors version. Initiatives that support curriculum development among community college faculty are integral in making high-impact teaching practices like this assignment possible.

The benefits of building literature and writing curriculum around graphic novels have been well established by educators over the past two decades, and undergraduate courses on graphic novels and comic books have become increasingly popular at American universities (Carter; Hansen; Mandaville and Avila; Moeller; Pagliaro; Schwarz).⁴ One of the main goals in a literature course on graphic novels is for students to analyze with depth and nuance the choices that graphic novelists make and the impact of those choices. In the graphic novel, form and meaning are indivisible. Content is inseparable from how the author chose to depict their story, and every formal detail contributes to character development and thematic significance. The engaging interplay of words and pictures makes graphic novels easily and quickly devoured by readers, but the academic study of graphic novels compels students to slow down and interpret the possible meaning of the combined formal choices that the author made. In his introduction to *Teaching the Graphic Novel* (2009), Stephen E. Tabachnik observes that graphic novels “stir fascinating classroom discussions about visual and verbal cognition” (5). Indeed, studying the graphic novel—a genre defined by its fusion of picture and word—builds multiple forms of literacy. Analyzing the unique fusion of textual and visual elements on the page strengthens students’ metacognitive awareness of reading as a deductive, participatory process.

More recently, educators have begun to recognize the value of giving students the opportunity to design their own comics, although the practice has not yet become commonplace. In light of national best practices for writing pedagogy, Gabriel Sealey-Morris theorizes “the conditions necessary” for integrating comics-making into composition courses, although his essay does not provide specific assignment guidelines or discussion of student work (31). David Bahr identifies drawing as “one of the most effective teaching practices to help students at my community college” understand graphic narrative (59).

He has integrated informal doodling exercises throughout his curriculum but stops short of asking students to create graphic narratives as a formal assignment. Meanwhile, Kathryn Comer asks students in her upper-level composition course to create their own graphic memoirs, and she uses as a pedagogical framework the key concepts of “narrative gaps, narration, and focalization” to help her students make design choices; her case study offers a close reading of comics generated by two students through the lens of these key concepts (75). Andrew Bourelle gives students the option to create a short graphic narrative with the objective of developing their “multimodal literacy” (94). Likewise, literature professor Alison Mandaville and art professor J. P. Avila have collaborated on a comics-creation assignment. Mandaville’s students make their own comic books to “better grasp how literary concepts work in the visual form” (250), while Avila’s students do so to gain “a stronger understanding of graphic design” (251).

Several impressive models have emerged in recent years of curriculum solely centered on comics creation. As a cartoonist, Lynda Barry in *Syllabus* and *Making Comics* delineates a whimsical approach to comics curriculum. Through playful exploratory exercises, she seeks to rekindle in university students the delight that children find in drawing and storytelling.⁵ While Barry’s informal exercises in visual storytelling have informed my curriculum, her emphasis is intuitive discovery rather than the deliberate use of design elements like panel layout. Nick Sousanis, whose *Unflattening* is a seminal example of academic theory in the form of graphic narrative, has pioneered a Comics Studies minor and shared a marvelous compendium of his teaching practices on his website *Spin Weave and Cut*. The intriguing guiding philosophy of his comics pedagogy is, “You will become confident in finding your own approach to saying things that can only be done in comics” (Sousanis, *Syllabus for Advanced Comics Making*).

Sousanis’s curious emphasis on what comics can “say” is not unlike that of Riki Thompson, who teaches a comics project in her creative writing course. Thompson describes the “complex . . . multiple layers of storytelling” in graphic narrative as “telling through words, telling through images, and telling through the relationships and placement of these elements” (47). But graphic narratives do more than simply convey information in multiple modes. They are literary texts that evoke and suggest meanings in more subtle ways. Thompson’s approach treats images as “illustrations” (53) that “support the written story” (52). This is understandable in the context of a creative writing course, but it undermines the fundamental definition of graphic narrative as a dynamic—and not always symbiotic—interplay of word and image. The sophistication of graphic narratives emerges in the moments of tension when word and image provide different cues and even contradict each other, and students should be encouraged to play with this ambiguity.

Focusing the assignment on the distinctive literary elements of graphic narrative—and asking students to reflect on their formal choices in specific detail—is crucial to helping students to become capable and confident readers of and participants in the genre. If we approach graphic narrative as a literary genre, it is possible to guide students to produce graphic narratives that suggest and evoke rather than tell, and that experiment with formal features, regardless of students' drawing abilities. For community college students to overcome their self-doubt and become immersed in the meditative, nuanced process of combining image and text, a great deal of groundwork is necessary. The following pages outline the assignment guidelines I have developed as well as informal exercises designed to move students from self-doubt to self-inquiry.

Assignment Guidelines

Introducing students to the project guidelines as early in the semester as possible gives them time to ask questions, begin mulling over ideas, and read course texts as possible models. In the assignment guidelines, it is beneficial to specify exactly what formal elements students will be required to incorporate into their graphic narratives. This prepares students from the outset to develop the relationship of literary style and theme in their graphic narratives. The assignment guidelines reiterate the formal elements that students have analyzed in course texts during the semester and that are now available for them to deploy, including:

- a title and chapter headings
- panels of different sizes, including at least one splash page (a full-page panel)⁶
- bordered and open panels
- text elements: speech balloons, thought balloons, captions, and sound effects
- purposeful use of black and white and/or color
- at least one close-up of a face, figure, or object
- at least one wordless panel
- visual symbols

While students have many choices to make, the assignment gives them parameters to support the production of viable graphic narratives. There are no guidelines as to the story content, but students are invited to make the following choices:

- what story to tell (fictional or autobiographical)
- intended reading audience and purpose
- themes

- visual style and story genre
- medium: students may hand-draw or paint, use collage, use photographs, and/or use digital tools
- format and dimensions
- length/scope of story (to be determined by the story, but the minimum number of pages should be ____, as determined by students with instructor guidance)

This focus on the formal elements reminds students that in composing a graphic narrative, they should consider how they will represent their story at the same time as they develop the story content. The checklist of required elements makes transparent for students the balance of choice and constraint in the assignment, a balance that the authors of *The Meaningful Writing Project* have found to be essential: “the ultimate sweet spot is found between instructor requirements and students’ freedom to choose” (Eodice, Geller, and Lerner 38). Notably, the assignment guidelines say nothing about drawing or writing skills. A student could author a graphic novel all about anthropomorphic triangles or simple stick figures and successfully execute the assignment. The guidelines simply ask students to show that they can utilize formal elements in a purposeful way to demonstrate understanding of the genre. Because of this, the only thing that students cannot do is outsource their artwork to someone outside the class. Although commercial comic book studios divide their labor in this way, and although community-based comic book projects often use an illustrator to facilitate the process, it is important that students experience the challenges of making every choice happen on the page to understand more fully how comics work. Thus, the assignment becomes a way that students manifest their knowledge of the vocabulary they have learned and worked with since the semester began.

Challenges to Consider

When I hand out the assignment, students are quite preoccupied by how many pages long their graphic narrative should be. As student D. imparts poignantly, “One of the biggest challenges I encountered myself was how do I condense these haunting memories in 10 pages?” Thompson has suggested linking page count to letter grade, with an eight-page comic eligible for a B and a comic of twelve pages or more eligible for an A (61). While story development is important, producing more pages does not guarantee a successful graphic narrative; in fact, the instructor’s goal should be for students to move beyond their preoccupation

with page count and focus on story depiction. Students do need to consider what is viable in terms of time and scope—especially since they may have other responsibilities to juggle, including their other classes, extracurricular activities, work, and childcare—as well as what is necessary to tell a cohesive story. A multi-part epic with scads of characters and a complicated backstory may be exciting to imagine, but making it happen on paper is another matter. Student K. recalls, “I thought about abbreviating my entire forty-three years [in] ten to fifteen pages,” but he quickly realized that this was unrealistic. I involve students in setting the page count by asking them to vote anonymously for a minimum page count, and (with a little prodding) we have always arrived at about ten pages, with the book’s physical dimensions left up to the author’s discretion. Involving students in determining assignment guidelines like page count gives them a sense of authorial agency that builds confidence.

While the assignment guidelines foreground the formal elements, what story to tell and what genre to employ are the first decisions to preoccupy students. Having read several graphic memoirs in the class, many students identify a transformative turning point in their own lives that they want to depict—such as taking a cross-country bicycle trip, going through a break-up, or learning English. Other students decide to create a comic book for beginning readers with their own children in mind as their audience. Some students wish to contribute to their favorite genre, such as manga, fairy tale, science fiction, or detective fiction. For students of color who are fans of these genres, it can be a significant contribution to create the characters they want to see. Students want to tell a story that is personally meaningful and worthy of sharing with their peers.

This first crucial decision of what story to tell can take several false starts, as student J. shares in her artist’s statement:

I am no artist and everything I tried failed, so I decided to tell the story metaphorically. At one point, I tried fruits [as characters] but that did not seem to work either, and I became very frustrated and disillusioned. Two Sundays ago, I was sitting in my kitchen when my grandson keeps pushing a slice of his toast from his plate to the table, and every time his mom put it back Sitting there watching them go back and forth with the slice of toast was what inspired my title and how to write my story [“The Annoying Slice of Toast”].

The assignment presented J. with a genuine puzzle that preoccupied and even vexed her. Her roundabout brainstorming process demonstrates the importance of giving students the time and support necessary to test out possible approaches. As her reflection reveals, one of the greatest challenges of teaching this project is helping students to overcome their self-doubt. Mandaville and Avila claim that

educators are more uneasy than students: “English professors worry because they can’t draw. Design professors worry because they can’t write. . . . Students don’t seem to worry so much, seeing themselves as learners, not experts” (250).

While it is true that instructors may feel uncertain about how to teach and assess a graphic narrative assignment, we should not underestimate students’ trepidation. Students with self-perceived deficits may be reluctant to present themselves as “learners, not experts.” According to the authors of *The Meaningful Writing Project*, “Access to engagement is regulated for some students by low academic self-concept, stereotype threat, preparedness, gender, race, parental support, and other invisible factors” (Eodice, Geller, and Lerner 55–56). Students may be uneasy because of their insecurities as learners as well as misconceptions about what learning means and what college is supposed to be like. They may want to be seen as professionals and may feel afraid of being revealed as amateurs or imposters who do not belong at college. In *The College Fear Factor*, Rebecca Cox describes how community college students tend to see college as a means to professional advancement and economic stability. This utilitarian view “motivates students to seek the most useful and efficient educational path . . . [and to take an] instrumental approach to higher education” (43). In this context, the freedom to make choices in a creative project can feel like a risk or threat rather than an exciting opportunity to experiment. Some students may perceive playful activities like doodling, coloring, and cartooning as both childish and a test they expect to fail.

However, if the course curriculum has successfully demonstrated that graphic novels should not be underestimated and are worthy of serious study, students will take the idea of making their own graphic narratives seriously. In fact, many students raise the stakes by deciding to depict deeply personal and traumatic experiences. For instance, student D. acknowledges that rendering the story of her father’s deportation was both re-traumatizing and cathartic. Exposing this very personal story required both strength and vulnerability, as she discloses: “Many times I would find myself crying while drawing, wishing this was just fiction. I am allowing the audience to invade my personal life . . . but it felt right to share it.” Likewise, student S. was nervous about her drawing abilities, but nevertheless chose to divulge something very personal, her adoption story: “I want my readers to realize that not being raised by your biological parents for any reason shouldn’t be a reason to hate your [adoptive] parents. . . . this is why I chose to create a graphic memoir hoping to convince my readers that it is okay to be adopted.”

When students realize how much time and effort it will take to create their graphic narrative, they become concerned about being able to do justice to a story they have chosen because of its autobiographical significance. Indeed, S. admits

in her artist's statement: "It was a very scary task. I thought I could never make it possible—first the drawing part was freaking me out; second, I was afraid not to have enough time to make it happen." To share a story of personal vulnerability in a new genre using novice drawing and writing skills is a very perilous aspiration. As with any writing assignment, self-doubt can lead to procrastination, with tragic results. In *Making Comics*, Barry observes, "When something is done completely by hand there is no way to rush it or fake it" (31). It might be more accurate to say that it is painfully obvious when a graphic narrative is hastily composed the night before the due date. To help students overcome their doubts and avoid procrastination on this assignment—to take the plunge into self-inquiry and a sense of creative curiosity—requires a great deal of scaffolding and confidence-building.

Scaffolding Exercises

Since the student-created graphic narrative is a culminating assignment, it is useful to design the course from the first day with this endpoint in mind. As Thompson emphasizes, students "must first become adept at the demanding task of interpretation and close reading of comics so they may transfer knowledge to make informed design decisions in their own writing" (46). It is important to begin a course on graphic novels with a unit establishing the vocabulary and key concepts of the genre and giving students opportunities to analyze these key concepts in course texts through writing. I realized this simple fact after my first semester teaching the course when I noticed that students who had the most difficulty with the graphic narrative assignment were those who ended the term shaky on foundational vocabulary. Students who mistakenly refer to "speech bubbles" and "boxes" rather than speech balloons and panels have not integrated the foundational vocabulary of comics into their understanding and thus have difficulty applying the concepts in their own graphic narratives. Subsequent units in my course ask students to engage in detailed close readings of course texts to reinforce the relationship between form and meaning in graphic narratives.

To prepare students to compose their own graphic narratives, there are several ways to ease anxiety and generate excitement: incorporating low-stakes cartooning throughout the semester, validating all skill levels, giving flexible options, and composing in the classroom. First, my curriculum integrates informal drawing exercises throughout the semester to make drawing together an ordinary, low-stakes activity and to reinforce literary concepts. These simple exercises put theory into practice in a playful, loose way. On the first day of class, I show Barry's "Which of These Is a Bad Drawing?" a cartoon that questions students' belief that a drawing can be deficient (*Syllabus* 17). In the simple style

of Ivan Brunetti that Barry demonstrates, students draw a self-portrait with a speech balloon stating their name, their intended major, a goal, and a hobby, which they share with the class. Proving the maxim that we are often our own worst critics, students are frequently bashful about their own self-portraits but charmed by their peers' sketches. Likewise, when we do self-assessment of essay drafts, I ask students to draw a one- or two-panel comic that represents their drafting process. In his one-panel cartoon, student M. sketched his bespectacled face surrounded by masses of thought balloons that read: "Bruh . . . You can do better than this . . . Make sure it makes sense . . . Don't wait until the last minute again . . . I wanna do this but I wanna sleep." There is a refreshing honesty in his self-assessment as well as those depicting writers lost in dark woods, adrift on stormy seas, or flying triumphantly through the sky.

When we read foundational texts like Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* or Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art*, we use doodling to reinforce literary concepts. For example, when we discuss Eisner's ideas about timing, I ask students to sketch a sequence of panels portraying someone waiting for the bus. We then discuss the devices that they used to represent time moving slowly (such as using a lot of small panels with incremental changes like garbage slowly tumbling by, a clock melting, or a figure pacing or slumping or even turning into a skeleton). When we read McCloud's chapter on expressive lines, students are each given a slip of paper naming an emotion or state of being (such as joyful, calm, delirious, furious, or nauseous) and asked to draw a picture that represents that concept without words. We tack the pictures on the walls and try to guess what emotion each image conveys; students are self-conscious about sharing their doodles at first and then start to have fun making guesses and teasing each other. These kinds of low-stakes creative exercises make cartooning in the classroom habitual so that the final project is not the first time we have drawn together.

Despite this practice throughout the semester, every time that I have passed out the assignment guidelines for the graphic narrative, a student worries, "But I can't draw!" It takes a great deal of affirmation for my students to accept, let alone embrace and own, their amateur drawing styles. To encourage students to celebrate their amateur drawing style, we survey validating models. We begin by looking at graphic narratives created by former students. Although these samples represent a variety of drawing abilities and are meant to affirm that "you can do this, too," some students tend to be impressed and intimidated. I have begun pointing out that the students who created these graphic narratives felt the exact same way, and I predict that future students will have the same reaction to the work produced by current students. To further legitimize all skill levels and drawing styles, we survey celebrated examples of art that some viewers might mistakenly dismiss as "childish" or "scribbly," such as the paintings of Jean-

Michel Basquiat. We look at work that is powerful because of its simplicity and iconicity, such as Keith Haring's murals and Charles Schultz's *Peanuts*. In their artist's statements, a number of students have identified Marjane Satrapi's iconic drawing style as a particularly encouraging model. Student J. writes that *Persepolis* "inspired me with her monochromatic, bold, chunky, childlike, saturated, and shadowy illustrations which made it easier for the artist to get the story across." In addition, we survey visually hyperbolic Web comics by Sarah Anderson, Allie Brosh, and Connie Sun, and we thumb through inexpensive, photocopied zines sold at the local comic book shop. Interestingly, it is often the zines that give students the bit of brash confidence they need, when they realize that they could produce something as good or better than what is being sold in a comics store.

Students often overlook the strengths they can bring to bear on this assignment, and so I have developed several informal exercises to activate students' awareness of their assets. First, we write informally on quotes from graphic novelists reflecting on their writing and drawing processes. For instance, Marjane Satrapi has shared of her approach, "I draw lots of things I prefer not to say" (Lane). This quote strikes a chord with students who have chosen to represent traumatic personal experiences in their projects. Satrapi affirms that in graphic narrative, it is not necessary to explicitly declare everything using words. Using characters' facial expressions and gestures—as well as the power of the unspoken and invisible—students can convey emotionally charged material in a way that is indirect but that resonates with readers. On the other hand, in his interview with Mina Kaneko, Adrian Tomine states, "If anything, I've put an emphasis on the writing over the years, letting the words do the heavy-lifting with the storytelling." His words resonate with students who identify writing as their strong suit. He gives students permission to lean on their writing ability, which lessens their self-induced pressure about drawing. When I realized how often students reacted with surprise and relief to Tomine's words, I began giving them a list of personal qualities to self-assess:

- writing ability
- drawing ability
- time management
- self-doubt
- story idea
- enthusiasm
- determination
- understanding the assignment guidelines
- understanding graphic novels

We use a double journal entry to sort these qualities into two columns: My Perceived Strengths and My Perceived Weaknesses. Students realize that in focusing on their perceived weaknesses, they have overlooked strengths like determination, their belief in their story, or their capable grasp of how graphic novels work. All these activities are meant to legitimize community college students as graphic novelists and encourage them to embrace their style and trust their strengths.

Letting students know that they have options besides drawing also helps to depressurize the assignment. Students can use one of the free software programs available⁷ for generating your own comics (although I have had very few students take up this option, and those who did found it limiting). Students can work with a partner in the class to collaborate on the pictures and text (although only a few students have chosen to pair up). In addition to hand-drawing, students can take a narrative series of photographs, add textual elements, add panel borders, and manipulate image size and page layout to achieve the assignment goals. They can also mix hand-drawing, found images, and photographs. Following the seminal example of Art Spiegelman, some students have incorporated selective photographs and other ephemera into their hand drawn graphic memoirs to show readers the real people behind the cartoons. For instance, student R.'s graphic memoir of her childhood in Israel ends with photographs of her children to show how her story continues to a new generation. Student K. included a photograph of himself with his army buddies to "pay homage" to service members.

In spite of their self-doubt, most students ultimately choose hand-drawing as their dominant mode of expression. The reasons are not entirely clear, especially given students' facility as amateur photographers and digital storytellers in the realm of social media.⁸ It is possible that my course design indirectly communicates to students my partiality for the hand made. Since the class does not teach digital design or take place in a computer lab, students may also feel wary of learning new tools on their own. But perhaps in the end there is something comforting about returning to the familiar drawing tools of childhood. Students may feel that by holding the pencil, they will have more authorial control over the process. Perhaps students view digital design as a shortcut and want to challenge themselves to hand-draw a comic like the authors they see as models. It is important to note that many community college students have limited resources to expend on art materials. Since most of my students have little money to spend on extra supplies, I encourage them to use what they have. Students often use printer paper, construction paper, or an inexpensive art pad, along with pens, pencils, markers, colored pencils, and crayons. It takes a certain level of trust for students to feel confident that they can succeed on the assignment using limited resources.

Storyboarding and Making Thoughtful Choices

Even more than material resources, what community college students lack is sufficient time. Because of this, the more brainstorming, storyboarding, and composing that can take place in the classroom, the better. Students begin by writing informally about potential story ideas and why they are motivated to share these stories with readers, then share their brainstorming in small groups. Once students have identified their potential focus, we storyboard in the classroom on big sheets of newsprint paper that I provide. A storyboard is a visual outline that helps students to organize their narrative sequence and plan how they will divide their narrative into panels. Students write notes and draw thumbnail sketches to delineate the segments and key turning points taking them from beginning to end. Through storyboarding, students identify the big impact moments in their narrative that deserve emphasis using splash pages or bold color, for example.

The storyboarding process makes students conscious of the different kinds of narrative structure available to them, from the quest to the bildungsroman to a simple series of episodic vignettes, as well as how they might try intentionally subverting conventional narrative structures. For instance, student N. struggled with how to end her graphic memoir about social anxiety. In talking with her classmates, she realized that an ambiguous conclusion was a valid and fitting choice: “I chose not to have the normal beginning-middle-end structure. My narrative sort of ends on a sour note with no real sense of resolution. I decided on this because when dealing with something like anxiety, it doesn’t just go away.” As N.’s example suggests, storyboarding helps students to develop the relationship of form and meaning in their graphic narratives. It cultivates the writing and thinking skills of hierarchizing information and communicating ideas with economy and impact.

Like any writing assignment, composing a graphic narrative is a recursive sequence of decisions, attempts, reconsiderations, and more decisions. When storyboarding and making their graphic narratives, students are faced with a number of interesting puzzles to solve: how to use panel size and number to slow down or speed up the story pacing, how to represent a flashback visually, how to differentiate characters, how to use setting and color to externalize a character’s mood, and how to indicate a disjunct between what a character thinks and what they say. These kinds of puzzles arise organically as students figure out how to execute their story on the page.

For example, student S. worried about how to differentiate herself visually from other characters in her graphic memoir, especially given her use of flashbacks. She decided to draw a flower on her hijab as an identifying motif—an elegantly simple solution. Many students find the selective use of color in their graphic narratives to be especially useful in communicating with readers. Student

N. utilized different colored panel borders as a mood indicator for her protagonist living with social anxiety. As she explains: “I changed the color of certain borders when the character started to disassociate and became overtaken by anxiety.” Thus, she devised an innovative method of combining color and panel borders, using the elements that she had learned about for thematic resonance.

In balancing aspects of telling, showing, and suggesting, students need to consider whether readers will understand specific cultural references or whether they will benefit from additional context clues (such as translations of dialogue from other languages). This is to say, students need to consider the background knowledge of their diverse reading audience. For example, student R. decided to focus her graphic memoir on her childhood in Israel. When she showed the first few pages to her classmates, she was surprised to find that “what is obvious to me is not obvious to others On my cover page, I am obviously standing on a medical evacuation tank, which was not obvious to others.” She was taken aback by the gulf of understanding she encountered, but in her artist’s statement, R. declares, “I learned that if I want people to understand what is going on in my story, I need to be as clear as possible. I tried achieving transparency and understanding by using motifs.” She decided to label unfamiliar objects like the medical evacuation tank, an unobtrusive solution. As these examples show, the assignment invites students to think of themselves as graphic novelists making creative decisions and considering the potential impact of each decision on readers.

The Artist’s Statement and Assessment

The artist’s statement is a crucial accompanying document. As a piece of reflective writing, the artist’s statement gives students the opportunity to explain their design choices and what they learned (Thompson 62; Bourelle 97). Throughout the semester, students have engaged in close readings of published graphic narratives, and in writing the artist’s statement, they turn their analytical eye inward. Essentially, the artist’s statement provides the student’s interpretation of their own work and gives them a chance to speak directly to readers about their objectives and motivations. As Bourelle notes, “What [instructors are] really grading is the thinking behind the project” (97). The artist’s statement asks students to describe and reflect on:

- their development process
- specific meaningful choices and their intended impact (what they want readers to notice)
- theme and purpose in relation to their imagined audience

- their influences (such as course readings, field trips, outside texts, cultural heritage, etc.)
- what was most challenging and most fulfilling about the process
- what they would do differently if they had more time
- what they learned about the genre by participating in it

It is important to note that the artist's statement gives students the opportunity to spotlight meaningful details that readers might have overlooked. As such, it can alleviate students' anxiety about artistic ability, because they can provide a rationale that emphasizes their intentions. For example, student K., in depicting his military experience, chose to draw simple stick figures that all look alike. In his artist's statement, he provides a compelling reason: "The reason for this is, as soldiers, we are nobody. The group matters, the mission matters, the individual doesn't exist. The moments where I show facial features are moments where I felt those individuals or myself existed as individuals." If it were not for his artist's statement, readers might have overlooked the significance of the interchangeable figures. While he did not need to justify using stick figures, his rationale highlights this decision as deliberate and thematically meaningful. The artist's statement gives students the opportunity to embrace their stylistic choices and to deepen readers' understanding and appreciation.

To help students understand the artist's statement as a writing genre, we assess samples from former students and from professional artists. It is important for students to practice writing descriptively in this assignment. Students often criticize the vague, abstract writing style of professional artist's statements, which enables us to discuss why we value concrete, specific writing. Thus, the artist's statement reinforces good writing practices in terms of communicating clearly with readers.

Being transparent about assessment criteria is important because this is a unique assignment.⁹ Unlike with an exam or an essay, students may lack the prior knowledge needed to self-assess their graphic narratives as they progress. While one student once remarked, "It's better than taking a final exam!" another student said, "I wish we could just write a paper. I know how to do that." Given that this creative assignment confounds some students' expectations of a college assignment, learning objectives need to align with assessment criteria clearly and transparently. Moreover, how to assess the graphic narratives deserves careful consideration, especially because many students choose to depict traumatic personal experiences. Grading autobiographical narrative poses challenges because students may feel that it is their experiences that are being assessed. While acknowledging that this is not an art class, assessing the formal elements measures students' understanding of the literary elements and avoids (as much as possible) a student feeling as if their autobiographical experience is being judged.

As with establishing the page count, what I have found most beneficial is involving students in designing the assessment rubric for the graphic narrative. I ask students to brainstorm what they would like readers to notice, appreciate, and evaluate in their projects (which gives them ideas for their artist's statements). Students engage in a lively debate about whether benchmarks like "interesting story" or "whether it looks sloppy or rushed like they did it the night before" should be included. Students ultimately land on more objective criteria such as:

- development of storyline (including use of sequential art from panel to panel to create story arc, character, theme, mood)
- page layout (panels, panel size, panels per page)
- relationships of images and text (including speech balloons, thought balloons, captions, and sound effects in relation to images, including characters, setting, visual symbols)
- overall presentation of final product

Coming to a consensus on the rubric helps students take ownership of the project, reminds them of the assignment goals, and reaffirms that drawing ability will not be part of the equation.

To celebrate students' work, we hold a Celebration Showcase during our final exam period in lieu of an exam. To earn full credit for their participation in the Showcase, students must arrive on time and be prepared. They must give a short informal presentation, as well as listen and ask questions in response to their peers' presentations. Before the presentations begin, students set up their graphic narratives and artist's statements around the room, and we have a chance to walk around and preview everyone's work. I give each student a handful of sticky notes and they leave short questions, feedback, and compliments on each other's work. Once we have had some time to float around the room and admire the projects, students dive into short presentations in the style of "show and tell." Each student gets their moment in the spotlight to highlight the most interesting ideas from their artist's statements. The first few times that I organized the Showcase, I found that some students summarized their story content but did not draw attention to the design choices they had made. Some students wanted to read aloud their entire comic book to the class and others rambled extemporaneously. To help students prepare for a concise and interesting presentation, I now provide a Presentation Preparation handout with key questions about their projects:

- Briefly, what is your graphic narrative about? Why did you decide to portray this story?
- What do you want readers to notice and appreciate about your graphic narrative?

- Which specific panels do you want to showcase for us?
- Why are you most proud of these panels?
- Why are these panels especially significant, in terms of the design choices you made or the way that text and images work together?
- What did you realize or learn from the process of making your graphic narrative?

Although students have shared their work-in-progress with each other in the preceding weeks, the showcase always produces some surprising revelations. Students may become tearful about the personal stories they have chosen to reveal, and we in the audience may be overtaken by emotion as well. In fact, student S. was quite pleased that her portrayal of her adoption story made some of her classmates shed tears, saying that this proved her graphic memoir a success. While students tend to admire and support each other's work, even expressing awe at each other's accomplishments, the presentations require the instructor to moderate discussion carefully. Students tend to be frazzled and tired during exam week and emotions can run hot. For this reason, it is not helpful to compare the projects with each other, but rather to take each on its own terms in light of the assignment objectives. Following the presentations, we have more time to amble around the room, read, and discuss informally. To make it a real celebration, I provide pizza and other refreshments. We endeavor to fully enjoy our refreshments while keeping student's projects safe from any disastrous soda spills.

The showcase is the culminating event of the course. It makes students accountable to each other as a community of writers and makes real the sense of a reading audience (Bitz 59–60; Thompson 61–62). In the future, I would like to find ways to share students' graphic narratives with a broader reading community. While the idea of giving students a bigger platform for sharing their work is exciting, I have always hesitated to do so because students are already so doubtful about their abilities, and above all I want them to complete the project and succeed in the course. Still, there are promising possibilities to consider: organizing a gallery exhibition on campus, photocopying the graphic narratives so students can gift them to readers, inviting more members of the campus community to the writer's showcase, or making students' work available for viewing online.

Community college students making comics requires a lot of time and hands-on learning in the in-person classroom, and it creates a very tangible sense of writing community. However, my remote teaching experiences during the pandemic compelled me to devise an alternative theory-to-practice writing assignment that some instructors of graphic narrative might find appealing. In

Spring 2020, I was in the midst of teaching the graphic novel elective when our university system transitioned to remote learning due to the pandemic. Many of our students were directly impacted, especially low-income individuals who perform essential work, take public transit, and live in multigenerational households. Moreover, many students experienced difficulties learning online because they lacked reliable Internet access and dedicated study space in their homes. Given the state of crisis into which we were plunged amid our abrupt shift to online learning, I could not fathom asking students to complete the graphic narrative assignment remotely. Instead, I invited students to write a proposal for their own graphic narrative about the pandemic. Writing a proposal compelled students to articulate how they would utilize the elements of graphic narrative to portray their pandemic story, thus demonstrating their understanding of possibilities inherent in the genre's storytelling vocabulary. Students were very inventive in drawing upon genres such as dystopian science fiction, disaster films, and superhero comics in their proposals. While it would certainly be possible to reconceive the graphic narrative assignment for online learning, I would rather reaffirm the crucial role of the in-person classroom experience. The profound struggles that community college students faced during the COVID-19 pandemic have only reinforced the importance of the classroom community in supporting high-impact learning.

Conclusion

For students, the potential meaning of making comics goes beyond what an objective rubric can assess. The graphic narrative and concurrent artist's statement cultivate students' self-knowledge as writers and as autobiographical subjects. The slow compositional process of comics-creation invites students to experience timeless immersion, a state of daydreaming, remembering, and intuitive creativity. This state of engrossment is particularly meaningful given the frenetic and precarious nature of their lives as community college students. As Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber argue in *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*: "We need time to think, and so do our students. Time for reflection and open-ended inquiry is not a luxury but is crucial to what we do" (x). As students are composing, they are daydreaming, ruminating, imagining, remembering. They are making intuitive choices. It is the slowness of creating a graphic narrative panel by panel that compels students to engage in this meaningful reflection. To really look at something is a slow and deliberate process, and it compels us to be present in the moment of consideration.

Researcher Charalampos Mainemelis writes, "Timelessness is the experience of transcending time and one's self by becoming immersed in a captivating present-moment activity or event" (548). Mainemelis notes that in this "harmo-

nious” state of flow, one’s task “becomes autotelic (i.e., an end in and of itself)” (Mainemelis 556). This intrinsically satisfying immersion in a creative undertaking counteracts the utilitarian, transactional approach to higher education that precarity forces especially upon community college students. In addition, for students accustomed to the ease of texting and taking digital photographs, the old-fashioned, laborious process of drawing every line, hand-writing every word, and composing every page panel by panel forces deceleration. As Alison Bechdel has observed, “When you’re drawing comics, you have to physically touch every square inch of every page you’re working on” (quoted in Chute, *Outside the Box* 166).

Student J. measures her achievement as the result of “fifty sheets of paper, and three pencils.” Students even notice the tactile sensation of coloring in a large surface with a pen or crayon: their hands get tired. Thus, they appreciate in a much more embodied way the reason why Bechdel’s *Fun Home* took seven years (“Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*.” PEN America) and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* took thirteen years to compose (Cavna). Student S. shares in her artist’s statement how she lost track of time during the immersive composition process: “I felt frustrated for not having enough time but then I told myself I will try and complete one page each day (mind you I end up doing three to four pages each time I sit down to do it).” My hope is for students to lose track of time as they incrementally build their story panel by panel, floating suspended in a space between their other obligations and appointments. The intrinsic rewards of timeless absorption give students a taste of the joys of a rich inner creative and intellectual life.

In the context of a literature course that requires students to write analytical essays and conduct research, it can be challenging to find the time and space for a creative project such as this. Not all undergraduate literature courses on graphic novels incorporate a creative project, but this deserves reconsideration. As driver’s education teachers have long known, there is no better learning than by doing. Making time for students to participate in the genre that they have studied fosters a deeper appreciation of the choices that graphic novelists make and the impact of those choices. Student K. admits that before taking the course, he viewed comics “as a platform where Ninja Turtles are allowed to use swear words,” but by the completion of the semester, he wrote, “I have new respect for the graphic novel as a result of both the readings . . . and creating my own.” Composing graphic narratives enhances the visual acuity of students as participants in an increasingly visual culture. Moreover, the process cultivates self-awareness, audience-awareness, and keen observation—skills that are beneficial across disciplines and career paths.

Beyond the university classroom, there are exciting examples of mini-comics projects being facilitated through community-outreach efforts that serve

marginalized populations. For instance, in *Manga High*, educator Michael Bitz describes his development of the Comic Book Project, an afterschool program for low-income, urban high school students in which participants create manga (a genre of Japanese comic books). Bitz discovered that “the comic books that children create through CBP have always been a means to the ends of creative thinking, personal expression, literacy development, and community building” (3). Researcher Sarah McNicol has organized a digital comics workshop for Bangladeshi women in Britain that enabled the participants to depict their migration experiences. Karen Gavigan and Kendra Albright worked with high school students in a juvenile correction facility to create a group-authored graphic novel about HIV/AIDS. In all these community-based projects, the organizers took into consideration participants’ potential lack of confidence in their drawing abilities. They worked around this roadblock by bringing in professional illustrators or technological tools to facilitate the comics-creation. This approach—which resembles that of commercial comics studios—made it easier for participants to focus on storytelling. And yet, if graphic narrative is a fusion of word and picture, what is missing when the storytellers are not doing the drawing? For example, Gavigan and Albright arranged for an illustrator to do the artwork for the comic book, but in their post-project feedback, students shared that they would rather create the art themselves (46). This shows that hand-drawing holds significant meaning for students, no matter the quality of the art produced.

Although students’ self-doubt about their drawing ability represents a significant obstacle in teaching this assignment, helping students to overcome that hurdle and successfully produce a graphic narrative is worth the effort. If the goal is for students to appreciate how form creates meaning, then it is essential for students to compose the pages themselves. Grappling with the choices and constraints of the genre deepens students’ appreciation of the myriad choices made by the authors whose work they have studied. As William Cordeiro and Season Ellison have observed, “When students create their own graphic texts, the sophistication of their composition skills often increases because they learn to coordinate and layer spatial and temporal cues” (176). The novelty of making choices about elements like character design, sound effects, font style, and panel layout makes students more conscious of writing as a process and themselves as authorial agents.

As an educator, honing this creative assignment helped me to appreciate more fully the importance of scaffolding in my literature and composition curriculum more broadly. Many of the informal exercises that I have described here are applicable to writing tasks across disciplines and attest to the importance of brainstorming, modeling, reflective writing, and peer feedback. Listening to students’ honest expressions of self-doubt (“I can’t draw!”) made me more aware

of self-sabotaging beliefs that students might not voice about a more standard essay assignment or exam (“I can’t write!”). The strengths as well as the baggage that students bring to the graphic narrative assignment tend to be indicative and revealing of their habits as writers and students overall.

That said, it is a delightful surprise to see a student find a strong sense of authorial voice in the graphic narrative assignment. Like many of her classmates, S. worried about her drawing ability and how much time it would take to create her own graphic narrative. In her artist’s statement, she acknowledges, “I came a long way into making this book. I had a lot of doubts in my head, because what I wrote about in my book is something I have never discussed. . . . To be honest, at first I didn’t like the fact that we had to write our own narrative; I felt like we are not at that level of writing books like professors.” However, as she began to realize how she could deploy the tools of the genre, she moved beyond self-doubt to self-inquiry. She no longer saw herself as a student doing an assignment but as a graphic memoirist immersed in a creative process: “I am thankful for the experience, because this made me push myself from my own comfort zone. I didn’t know I could create something so beautiful with my own hands using my mind.”

Notes

1. This research has been reviewed and granted IRB exemption by Hostos Community College, CUNY. Quotations have been used with permission from students’ graphic narratives and accompanying reflective artist’s statements. Students whose writing is quoted or whose work is referenced have been made aware of research protocols and their rights as research subjects. They have signed FERPA consent forms granting permission for use of their work. No current students were involved in this research; only students who have graduated from the community college were contacted. Students have consented to be identified by the first letter of their first name. The author has chosen to cite students as such to give them a measure of attribution for their words and ideas, in keeping with the spirit of the assignment described, which positions students as authors who deserve recognition.

2. “Graphic narrative” is a broad term that includes fiction and nonfiction narratives in the form of comics. For further discussion of definitions, see Chute, *Why Comics?*; Hatfield; McCloud.

3. While community college still may not be viewed as the traditional college experience, increasingly it is community colleges that provide an entryway to higher education. Upwards of 41% of undergraduate students attended two-year colleges in Fall 2019 (“AACC Fast Facts 2021”).

4. Moreover, scholars have begun composing and publishing research and theory in the form of comics, although this genre is still nascent (Bahl; Helms; Sousanis, *Unflattening*).

5. At the end of term, Barry’s students assemble their short exercises into zines; unfortunately, in *Syllabus* and *Making Comics*, she does not provide guidelines for this final assignment.

6. The number and size of panels on the page enables graphic novelists to control the movement of the reader’s eye across the page and thus the pace of the narrative, or what Eisner calls “timing” (*Comics and Sequential Art* 23–30). In addition, panel size can be used to create visual and thematic emphasis, especially in the case of splash pages. See also Cohn.

7. See Sousanis's "Making Tools and MiniComics" for a collection of digital comics-making resources.

8. For discussion of the digital storytelling tool Twine and its potential uses in undergraduate composition courses, see Salter and Moulthrop.

9. The artist's statement and graphic narrative are each worth 15% of the total course grade, so they carry significant weight.

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