

# Representation, Re-presentation, and Representin’ through Graphic Novels

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## **Abstract**

**This paper analyzes representation, re-presentation, and representin’ of disability experience in the visual form of graphic novels and comics. Research on the representation of disability in graphic novels and comics is reviewed. Several graphic novels for students in grades K-12 that feature protagonists with disabilities are analyzed. Finally, research with pre-service art teachers concerning the impact of reading these graphic novels and producing comics focused on the topics of inclusion, diversity, and empathy is presented.**

## **Keywords**

**Disability, comics, graphic novels, pre-service teachers.**

## **Background**

In the United States, approximately 12.9 % of all K-12 public school students have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for one of 13 disabilities and another 3-5 % of students have a 504 plan, providing accommodations for differing learners (NSEC, 2017). Worldwide, approximately 150 million children live with disabilities (United Nations 2011; UNESCO 2010).

Around the world, the standard for best practice for students is not to be segregated into separate or “special” classrooms, but rather included in mainstreamed settings. In their paper, *Increasing Disability Awareness through Comics*, McGrail and Rieger (2013) argue that “limited knowledge of disabilities and disability issues can lead to feelings of discomfort, awkwardness, and even fear by peers without disabilities” (p. 3). As the settings for students with disabilities change, art educators can respond with curricula that focuses on developing empathy and understanding of diverse life experiences.

One aspect of Disability Studies is the representation of persons with disabilities in society (Foley, 2014). In their book *Including Differences*, Kraft and Keifer-Boyd (2013) point out “we are affected by and informed how to respond, in part by representations of people in films, songs artworks, literature, advertising, and other forms of social practices and products” (p. 21). Art educators who take a social justice approach to curriculum content may consider issues of representation, supporting students to become active critical consumers and producers of visual media with concern towards how people are represented. This paper will examine the study of representation of disability in comics and graphic novels as a curricular approach for working with pre-service art educators. According to McGrail and Reiger (2013), “The recent scholarship on empathy supports the effectiveness of comics for identifying and fighting negative stereotypical attitudes towards those with disabilities” (p. 2).

This paper analyzes representation, re-presentation, and representin’ of disability experience in the visual form of graphic novels incorporated as part of an art education preservice graduate course, *Psychological, Sociological, and Phenomenological Approaches to Art Education* at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Research on the representation of disability in graphic novels and visual media are discussed. Several graphic novels for students in grades K-12 that feature protagonists with disabilities are presented. Critique of these novels explore the varying ways in which disabilities are represented in graphic novels. Finally, an implementation of

curriculum that utilizes the reading of graphic novels and creation of personal comics with pre-service art education students is discussed.

## **Representation**

Representation, as defined by Stuart Hall (2013), is the production of meaning through language and symbols. The nuanced meanings we attribute to specific words is why language matters in disability studies. The terms blind and visually impaired are not interchangeable, although they can both apply to the same person. Instead, words and languages create meaning and help us to decipher the world around us. Hall further argues that through representation, words and figures “stand in the place of, and at the same time, stand for” our concepts of the world (p. 2) Visual media is especially important in the way we gain knowledge of events, but the content is often influenced by bias. The dominant culture controls the content and distribution of representation in multiple forms of media. Hall warns that in media, an implicit and invisible construction of “otherness” and stereotypes are developed. Although Hall was referring to race, these notions are applicable to disability.

Researchers have found consistent problems in the way people with disabilities are represented in books, movies, television, comics and other forms of media, with these representations often perpetuating stereotypes. In the recent text, *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, Whalen, Foss and Gray (2016) examine how representations of disability challenge and uphold stereotypes. They argue, “comic art is capable of both finely grained nuances and cartoonish broad strokes . . . the history of how disability has been represented therein is fraught with problematic tropes” (p. 2). Common stereotypes of persons with disabilities as depicted in the media were first reported by Bilken and Bodgan (1977) as follows:

1. Pitiabile and pathetic

2. Object of violence
3. Sinister and/or Evil
4. Atmosphere: Individuals who are background characters
5. Super Crip
6. Laughable
7. His/her own worst- and only- enemy
8. Burden
9. Nonsexual
10. Incapable of fully participating in everyday life (pp. 5-9).

While this study was written thirty years ago, the use of these stereotypes remains prevalent today. In 2012, Moeller and Irwin completed a follow up study of their 2010 research *Seeing Different: Portrayals of Young Adult Graphic Novels*. In this study, the authors examined the 30 books listed on *The New York Times Graphic Books Best Seller List* in 2009, of which eighteen contained at least one character with a disability. The most frequent depiction of disability was classified as atmosphere, meaning in the background, for eleven characters. Another eight characters were identified as evil, three characters were identified as pitiable, two characters were portrayed as helpless, three were objects of violence, two were burdens, two characters were laughable, one was her own worst enemy, and one was a super crip. Only five characters with disabilities were depicted as inclusive members of their community. Although the authors found that the number of characters with disabilities depicted increased from their initial study in 2010, they found that the majority of these depictions still fulfilled the stereotypical portrayals as defined by Bilken and Bogdan (1977).

This research suggests that the common historical and current representation of persons with disabilities in comics and graphic novels fails to capture the complex and real experience of disability. Even as persons with disabilities have been more fully integrated into society through the advancement of disability and educational rights, representation in graphic novels remains reflective of the stereotypes first identified over forty years ago. Equally as problematic is the reinforcement of a code or system of representation that depicts disabled persons as perhaps laughable or non-sexual. Through these systems of representation, readers continue to learn inaccurate truths and assumptions about disability.

## **Re-Presentation and Representin’**

In reflecting on issues of representation in graphic novels, Whalen, et al. (2016) argue that “all representation does the cultural work of affirming received understandings and challenging them to create new stories” (p. xii). But re-presentation occurs when a perceived or known concept or idea is substituted with new knowledge. For pre-service art teachers, a re-presentation of disability which falls outside of the stereotypes or tropes as described by Bilken and Bodgan (1977), is important. In a study that examined pre-service teachers in Singapore, Hong Kong, Canada, and Australia, teachers who received training and experience with people with disabilities had more positive attitudes about people with disabilities than those who had not (Sharma et al. 2006).

In the last ten years, a new genre of graphic novels has been published in which disability is re-presented. These realistic portrayals are often written by disabled authors and/or comic book illustrators. In some graphic novels, such as the autobiography *Funny Misshapen Body*, disability/chronic disease is not the main focus of the story, nor does the author identify as disabled, but nonetheless diverse life experiences present new understandings of lived experiences.

In the graphic novels *Epileptic* and *The Ride Together*, disability is re-presented through

the lens of the sibling of someone with a disability. According to Birge (2010), “Comics are literally making visible the stories of individuals and groups who have largely been excluded from our social and political narratives” (p. 2). These stories provide important insights into the impact of growing up with a sibling with a disability, challenges of having a family member with a disability, and fears, prejudices and assumptions about living with a disability.

*The Ride Together* was written by two siblings, Paul and Judy Karasik, about their experience growing up with their autistic brother David. The book alternates between traditional written chapters, written by Judy, and a comic format written by Paul. The siblings are honest about the challenges of growing up with an autistic brother. In one scene, Paul describes his embarrassment at his brother’s hand flapping and vocalization in a movie theater. He repeatedly asks his brother to be quiet but is then hushed by a fellow movie goer who tells him to be quiet, realizing that “no one cares about David’s outbursts . . . nobody but me” (p. 126). Birge (2010) explains that the comic portion of the *The Ride Together* uses visual techniques “to more directly convey the intensity of external stimuli as they are experienced by many people with autism” (p. 5). In this book, the portrayal of autism is not focused on the savant—as so often happens with this disability, such as in the movie *RainMan*. Instead, the book is refreshingly honest about the impact of autism on family, and yet makes the family relatable by focusing on the everyday life of characters, relationships, and growing up.

*Real*, a Japanese Manga novel by Takehiko Inoue, follows three high school aged young men whose lives intersect on a basketball court following tragic life-changing events. The three main characters in *Real* are all marginalized by society for various reasons and struggling to do the one thing they love, play basketball. Nomiya, the first character introduced in the book, is a high school dropout, who suffers from his guilt over his role in a traffic accident, which caused a girl to lose the use of her legs. Nomiya has a strong desire to play basketball but with little other direction in his life. Togawa, once a rising track star, had his leg amputated below the knee

due to cancer. He is talented and fiercely competitive, but throughout the book he constantly feuds with his teammates. Takahashi, who at the start of the book was a popular basketball star, is hit by a truck while riding a bicycle and becomes paralyzed from the chest down. The book presents both disabled and non-disabled characters as troubled and realistic teens. *Real* deals with the reality of physical disabilities and the struggles the characters face, but does so in a way that is relatable to teenagers who have struggled to find their place.

Gude (2004) explains that the term representin' originates in U.S. urban street slang for "proclaiming one's identity and affiliation" (p. 7). Rather than identifying differences as otherness, through representin' persons claim ownership of their identity and represent it in ways that recognize the humanity of each individual. Authors who both identified as disabled and create work about the lived experience of their disability fall into this category. Kasai Leka's work, *I Am Not These Feet*, claimed ownership of her identity as an amputee—one who had purposefully chosen to be so. Ellen Forney in *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo and Me* explores mental health and its impact on her own life. Forney's work is especially important because while persons with physical disabilities have legal protections, persons with mental health diagnoses continue to face stigma and a lack of empathy.

Graphic novels and comics use visual imagery to communicate in ways that written language alone cannot. *El Deafo*, a memoir about growing up deaf by Ceci Bell, is an example of using visual media as a means of representin' disability experience. Bell explains that using a graphic memoir was

the perfect medium for this story because of the speech balloon. For example – if as a lip-reader—I am wearing my hearing aids and I'm looking right at you speaking, I understand every word you say, because I've got some sound coming in and the visual clues from your lips. So in a graphic novel, that speech balloon would be understandable to everybody . . . . But if I maybe had my hearing

aids out and wasn't looking at you, your speech balloon would be empty, because I wouldn't know what you were saying. And then if I had my hearing aids in, and I'm not looking at you—I can hear your voice because of my hearing aids, but it's all garbled, and so the speech in the speech balloon would be garbled (NPR, 2014, p. 3).

One of the funniest and most straightforward graphic novels in representin' disability is *Ditzabled Princess*, a comical diary inspired by real life, according to author Jewel Kats. In this short graphic story, the author claims ownership over disability, starting with the title and cover. In this particular book, we learn about Princess Jewel, whose portrayal challenges all the stereotypes described by Bilken and Bogdan (1977). The main character is a fun loving young woman. She is married, a belly dancer, and one can assume, sexually active. Rather than being a burden, her disability comes with advantages for her family, such as reserved handicapped parking. This refreshingly honest look reimagines representation of disability in a complex and relatable manner as the author pokes fun at herself for being a "slob" and a poor cook. The reader learns about a funky young woman who loves to shop and happens to have a disability.

It is important to remember that as these books re-present disabled experiences and the characters are representin' a specific disability, each individual is unique. No one representation can fully capture the experience of a specific disability, but rather acts as a case study to more fully understand an individual experience. In *El Deafo*, the young Deaf character is portrayed as part of an inclusive elementary school, capable of fully participating in everyday life. In *The Ride Together*, Paul acknowledges that David was neither pitiable nor laughable; he was able to go to the movies and it was Paul's own concerns, not others, that were causing difficulty. In none of these novels is disability presented through a background or sinister character. Through these stories, disability is re-presented with depth, empathy, and relatable characters. More examples of graphic novels and comics that defy stereotypes can be found in the resources section at the



end of this article.

A great deal of research has gone into the compilation of a list of graphic novels and comics that were used for this course to focus on disability through re-presented or representin' lenses. The range of graphic novels in this genre spans from children's literature to adult and Manga to cartoons. Only three of the books discussed would be considered best sellers: *El Deafo*, *Epileptic*, and *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo and Me*. Many of the graphic novels and comics compiled for this curricular unit are difficult to find and out of print, suggesting that these re-presented stories of disability remain outside of the mainstream.

## **Using Comics as Part of Curriculum**

One objective of the pre-service graduate course that I teach is to increase knowledge and empathy related to constructs of identity, specifically disability for K-12 students. Rather than focusing on disability from a medical model approach of deficiencies in the art room, I choose to incorporate a disability studies approach that “naturalized disabled people . . . and whose often-distorted representations in art, literature, film, theater, and other forms of artistic expression are fully analyzed” (Linton, 2005, p. 518). Prior to introducing comics, the class examined historical and current representations of people with disabilities.

The coursework is designed to expose students to a variety of contemporary artists and visual culture that can be used as source material for their own future K-12 classrooms. Increasingly, libraries and schools are incorporating graphic novels as part of the curriculum. Nippold, Duthie, and Larsen (2005) found that the most popular reading material with sixth and ninth graders included comics and graphic novels. And while language arts teachers may be incorporating these novels as part of curriculum, visual arts teachers also have a responsibility to help students become active consumers and producers of this hybrid visual media. In response to this goal, a strand of research and production related to graphic novels was incorporated into

the graduate level pre-service art education course at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Early in the semester, students were introduced to comics through a class field trip to the Harold Washington Library and teacher provided resources on comic art, including McCloud's (1993) *Understanding Comics*. Pre-service students were given a list of graphic novels and comics that focused on issues of identity, including disability. These materials were pre-chosen by myself, the instructor, to demonstrate a variety of drawing styles, audience age-levels, use of narratives, and issues. Students were asked to consider how the artists used visual elements to control and communicate their stories. Throughout the semester, students were individually responsible for reading and presenting to the class their comic or graphic novel. As part of their presentations and class discussions, we analyzed issues related to representation, representation, and representin' of identity in visual media.

As students were researching their books, they often took the time to further examine the representin' of disability that occurred. For instance, in *El Deafo*, the main character, who is Deaf, rejects the use of sign language. Upon reading this book, one of the graduate students met with a local Deaf artist to discuss Bell's representation of growing up Deaf. The Deaf artist talked about how the isolation that Bell experienced and included as part of *El Deafo*, may have been due to her lack of learning sign language and participation in the Deaf community. Unlike Bell's presentation of feeling isolated due to the fact that she was Deaf, the Deaf artist, explained that through embracing Deaf culture, learning sign language, and attending a boarding school for Deaf children, she found a community and acceptance at a younger age. While Bell and her family felt the best place for her was at a local school, learning to lipread, and not becoming fluent in sign language, other Deaf persons might disagree with those choices. Bell (2014) acknowledges "I am an expert on no one's Deafness but my own" (p. 236). Through independent research, the graduate student demonstrated that one book alone cannot create an accurate system of representation.

For the final project of the class, students are asked to consider major themes from the semester and develop their own comic page/s. This class explores the topic of identity and human development along with disability, and for this reason the breath of comics we read is vast. Students may choose to address any of these themes in relation to their own life, and create visual works based upon their own experiences. In creating the comics, students were asked to consider how the visual principles would impact their representation of the story. Below are two very different comics created by students in the class.

In Image 1, Mind Space, the student explores issues of mental health and being through two juxtaposed images accompanied by written poetry. Throughout the semester, this student connected with several of the graphic novels in which authors addressed issues of mental health. The student chose to juxtapose realistic photographs with hand-drawn spaces, highlighting how we create our interpretations of the world around us. The use of a photograph of a person, suggests that this is a real person, perhaps the artist herself. In the first space, the figure appears naked and in a closed dark space, while in the second space, the figure is clothed and standing

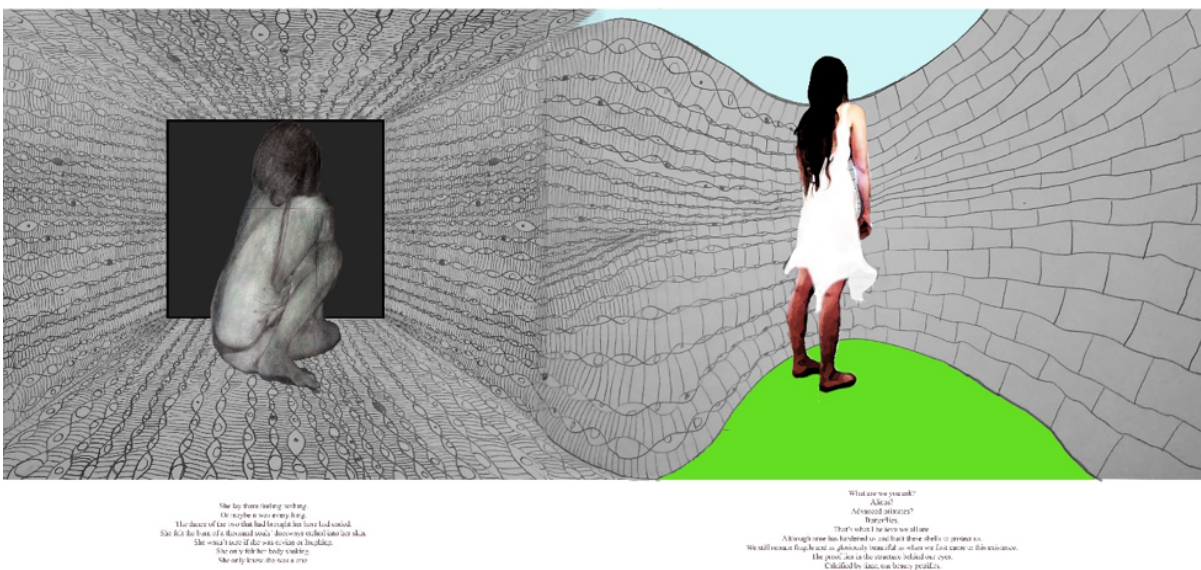


Figure 1: Mind Space.

on grass with an indication of sky. While the meaning of these images and poems is open to interpretation, the representation of a changing state of mind, and the acceptance of both as part of an individual represents an important duality that is often lacking in mainstream discourse. The student utilized the fact that comics often have more than one frame to contrast two different states of mind.

While Image 1 is a representation of inner self, Image 2, *The Ride*, represents a story or experience of the student. This student chose to create a comic in a different visual style utilizing more traditional elements of comics such as frames, speech bubbles, and narration boxes. Additionally, the comic is completely hand-drawn with black pen on white paper using a somewhat cartoonish style. Image 2, recalls the experience of hosting an interview in a non-accessible building only to discover the interviewee used a wheel chair. The use of a wheelchair is emphasized as the one dark visual element in the imagery— suggesting that the lack of consideration of the disability is a key factor in the story. In her re-telling of the story, the student represents the embarrassment and awkwardness that ensued in trying to find an accessible place to hold the interview. The interviewer is visibly stressed, blushing, and then sweating as they try and discover an alternate location. The story concludes by finding an accessible building with an elevator, but the reader is left realizing how assumptions led to this awkward incident. No one thought to mention that the building was non-ADA compliant. On the other-hand, the interviewee could safely assume that an interview would be conducted in an accessible place. The use of a more abstracted comic style is helpful in the design of this particular comic as it helps to generalize this situation and allows the artist to illustrate the internal emotions of the embarrassed and stressed interviewer.

Other students in the class, created comics that addressed issues such as gender identity, depression following the death of a family member, allergies, cultural stereotyping, and finding acceptance. Students chose to create these works in a variety of media, as diverse as the original



Figure 2: The Ride.

graphic novels and comics we had read for the course, suggesting that they had a broad understanding of what comics and graphic novels could look like. At the end of the semester, students

were asked to reflect upon graphic novels as part of the course. Over half of the class stated they had little or no experience with comics and graphic novels prior to the class. However, out of the ten students, eight said they were more likely to incorporate graphic novels or comics into their art curriculum as a result of taking the class. Students stated that they could be used to introduce “topics that might be hard to tackle . . . and would open doors for dialogue,” and the comics were “really fun to read . . . and it was valuable” (personal communication, December, 2016). The comments from students suggested that they found this unit to be a valuable and rich experience. Students expressed that they would enjoy more time to critically dissect the graphic novels and comics. Furthermore, it proved to be a way for students to tackle difficult issues, because “failure to address and challenge bias allows children to adopt the socially prevailing attitudes” (Sparks, 1989, p. 8).

## **Conclusions**

Referring to the “spectacle of the other,” Hall (2013) says when representing differences, we often fall back on stereotypes (p. 215). Through graphic novels that challenge the stereotypical representations of disability through re-presentation or representin’, these tropes are re-examined. Writers and artists with disabilities who choose to focus on these issues in their own work perform the work of representin’ of disabled experience in graphic novels. Through reading graphic novels and comics, pre-service students’ understandings of the lived experience of disability can be changed through a re-presentation of scenarios.

In this class, studying, discussing, and developing understandings of the representation of disability in graphic novels and comics provided important outcomes for pre-service students. First, the re-presentation, from the perspective of someone with a disability or a close relative, the intersection of disability with social interactions, school experiences, family life, and society, helped to prepare pre-service students to work with disabilities. Second, pre-service

students considered how representations of disability occur in visual culture and media, and the importance of educating K-12 students on this topic. Third, the representin' of disability by disabled authors and illustrators demonstrated the need for art educators to support students with disabilities to pursue the creation of visual imagery. Finally, through this unit pre-service students were exposed to the media of graphic novels and comics, considering the ways in which art educators could work with K-12 students to explore this media. When considering how to introduce disability issues with students, teachers should consider the use of graphic novels as a means to discuss issues of representation, introduce artists with disabilities, discuss disability issues, and develop understandings about classmates with diverse abilities.

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