

Showing is Telling: Exploring the Impact of Reading and Writing Comics on Youth Learning through Graphic Medicine Programs

Introduction

Dr. Sarah A. Evans, Presidential Early Career Professor at the University of North Texas, seeks funding in the amount of \$300,778 through the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program for an Early Career Development grant to investigate the impact of reading and writing comics on young peoples' learning processes (IMLS Goal 1, Objective 1.1; LB21 Goal 2, Objective 2.3 and Goal 3, Objective 3.3). Specifically, this project uses "graphic medicine" programs to explore how the medium of comics enhances teenagers' acquisition of information. Using qualitative methods and a sociocultural view of learning, the researcher will answer the following questions: 1) in what ways do teenagers learn through their comic reading experiences, 2) how does reading and writing comics about health enhance youth learning, and 3) how can libraries foster improved teen literacy learning with comics?

Project Justification

Despite promising research into comics for education early in the 20th century, concerns about various potential dangers to youth shifted mainstream perspectives of the format, beginning in the 1950s and continuing to the present (Giner-Monfort & Mengual-Morata, 2023; Tilley, 2012). Since the late 1980s, graphic novels have explored a more extensive range of topics for various audiences (Weiner & Eisner, 2012). The last two decades have seen an exponential increase in available graphic novels and willing readers. During this period, library staff have significantly advocated for adolescent comics readers (Behler, 2006; Griffith, 2010; Hoover, 2012; Schneider, 2014). Often addressing parents and teachers who say reading a comic is not "reading," staff relied on the relatively few empirical studies showing the positive impact of the format on readers.

With the recent increased availability of graphic novels from diverse creators on a diversity of subjects, more researchers are turning their attention to the comic medium. Recent studies on comics and learning have also shown positive results in using this medium for education (Cook, 2017; Spiegel et al., 2013; Norton, 2003). Methodologically, the studies range from analysis of student reader responses to classroom interventions with custom-created comics. However, most of this research takes place within formal learning settings. Librarians and educators need more empirical evidence on the impact of reading comics from applied research in informal learning settings, such as public libraries.

A promising area of applied research on learning comes from the emergent field of graphic medicine. Graphic medicine refers to health narratives and medical information created and shared in the format of comics, which, when collected, create a sequential art story called a graphic novel. Originally conceived as a way to increase medical students' empathy, it has expanded to include the communication of health information to various populations as well as a tool for participatory personal expression of health experiences. In their *Graphic Medicine Manifesto*, the interdisciplinary field's founders state, "Graphic medicine is also a movement for change that challenges the dominant methods of scholarship in healthcare, offering a more inclusive perspective of medicine, illness, disability, caregiving, and being cared for" (Czerwiec et al., 2015).

Since 2021, Dr. Sarah A. Evans and a team of interdisciplinary colleagues have conducted research into the use of graphic medicine in public libraries by creating and implementing a health literacy program where participants both read graphic novels and create their own comics (Evans, 2021; Evans et al., 2022a, 2022b). Dr. Evans, as Principal Investigator, now proposes using graphic medicine programs to examine how teens learn from reading and writing comics and explore how library staff can better support teen literacy with this medium. Her sociocultural-historical view of learning (Cole, 1996) informs her research methods, directing attention to various aspects of multilevel phenomena (Rogoff, 2003). She will use qualitative methods to illuminate the multiple meanings and features of the complex act of reading, writing, and discussing comics. Data collection and analysis happen throughout the project, with the research team using a constant comparison perspective to find patterns of co-occurrence (Heath and Street, 2008) emerging from the data set, that includes interviews, focus groups, in situ observations, and reflective journaling. Dr. Evans will focus on how participants construct meaning and view themselves as gaining an understanding of their learning (Merriam, 2009).

Project Work Plan

Year 1: Dr. Evans, in collaboration with a graduate research assistant and staff project specialist, will conduct interviews and focus groups through nine public libraries – one location in each of the nine divisions of the United States, as indicated by the U.S. Census Department (2021). Using online technology, Dr. Evans will interview the library staff member at each location focused on serving teens. She will ask the staff member to gather five teen patrons of different age groups and backgrounds to be part of a focus group conversation with the PI via video conferencing. Each participant

(library staff member and adolescents) will receive \$25 compensation. The interviews and focus groups will explore the current state of graphic novels and comics in library services and teen readers' lives. Conversations will be video recorded and transcribed, then analyzed by the research team. Analysis of this data will provide a baseline to compare the impact of program activities in Year 2.

Year 2: Of the nine libraries from Year 1, Dr. Evans will work with library staff and teens in four of these locations to conduct a week-long graphic medicine program. This program is a modification of the previous pilot model Dr. Evans and colleagues created. In the graphic medicine “teen camp,” approximately 10 patrons at each library will participate in drawing exercises and read and discuss comics and graphic novels about health experiences. At the end of the week, each participant will have created their own 2 to 4-panel comics about their own health experience. Each participating library staff member will receive \$100 in compensation for hosting the program. Each teen participant in the week-long program will receive \$50 in compensation and approximately \$50 in art supplies and copies of two graphic novels. The PI will conduct the program sessions, which will be video recorded and analyzed for evidence of learning as social practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

To further measure the program's impact, the PI will interview each library staff member and teen participant approximately six months and twelve months after the program ends. For each interview completed, a participant will receive \$25 in compensation. In addition, the research team will ask five teens at each location (20 teens) to do a weekly journal comic for the first six months after the program for a compensation of \$10 per comic. The interviews of these 20 teens will be compared and contrasted with the 20 teens who do not continue journaling with comics.

Year 3: Early in year 3, the four librarians who participated in the teen camp will be gathered virtually for a design day activity, for which they will each receive \$100. Through their experiences, they will work together in pursuit of concrete ideas that can help other library staff members better enhance teen learning and literacy through comics and meaningful programs and collections. Dr. Evans and her research team will use this information to create a video learning series about comics and literacy for libraries. The research team will invite teen participants from Year 2 to share their personal experiences in these videos (with parental permission). The research team will also host four interactive webinars for teachers and library staff who want to run their graphic medicine program. These videos and webinars will be promoted nationally and internationally through library professional organizations, including the American Library Association’s Graphic Novels and Comics Round Table, the Young Adult Library Services Association, and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions’ Library Services for Children and Young Adults Section.

Diversity Plan (Optional)

Using the nine divisions outlined by the Census Department will create regional diversity. Within the group of nine, the research team will recruit a range of library sizes and community types, such as rural, suburban, and urban. Additionally, the PI will work with each library staff participant to develop an outreach plan to contact underserved populations in their communities through relevant organizations and invite their participation in the focus groups and graphic medicine programs. They will strategize to recruit neurodivergent teens and teens identified as English Language Learners since these groups are often said to benefit from reading in the comics format (Attwood & Gerber, 2020; Csabay, 2006; Johnson, 2022).

Project Results

This grant will support Dr. Evans continued career development as a researcher of multiple literacies in informal learning environments. Empirical research in this area supports the work of libraries as centers of lifelong learning. In addition to the video learning series and webinars discussed above, the research team will disseminate their findings through three academic journal articles, two professional journal articles, and two conference presentations, one national and one international.

Budget Summary

Dr. Evans is requesting a total project budget of \$300,778. Salary and fringe of \$78,890 for the PI and other personnel. Salary, fringe, and tuition of \$96,602 for the Graduate Research Assistant (GRA). \$17,300 for PI travel to libraries for conducting research and to conferences for presentations and \$5,000 for GRA conference travel. \$ 4,136 for library workshop materials. \$15,110 for payments to librarians, focus groups, and teen participants. Indirect costs at a 48.5% research rate of \$87,199. Total student support costs for the project: \$102,103.