SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education

Volume 2
Issue 1 *Imagining, Re-imagining, and Examining*

Article 8

September 2015

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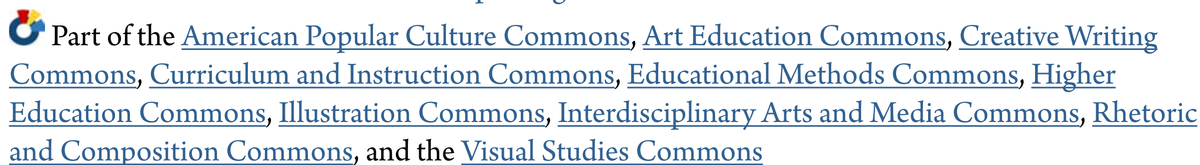
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Recommended Citation
Sousanis, Nick (2015) "Grids and Gestures: A Comics Making Exercise," *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 8.
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Grids and Gestures: A Comics Making Exercise

Nick Sousanis

This is an exercise I developed for the graduate education course on comics that I taught at Teachers College, Columbia University and have subsequently been using for public talks I have done with audiences of academics, educators, and college and high school students. Since most of my students and audiences typically self-describe as non-artists, I wanted something that explored the process of making comics, but did not require established drawing skills – anyone could do it and quickly. While comics activities involving pre-defined templates certainly have their merits, I find for my preferences that they do not get at the deeper issues involved in laying out a comics page and the significant role composition plays in conveying narrative. Instead of putting the emphasis solely on the drawing within the panels, I wanted to give participants a real taste of a comics maker's decision-making process, which as Thierry Groensteen (2007) points out, begins with considerations of the entire page as a whole spatial unit first and foremost (p. 21). As well, it was essential to me that this activity would be engaging and provide a meaningful outlet for individual expression. People needed to be invested personally in the activity. In doing Grids and Gestures with numerous groups over the last several years, I have found that it has served as a way for novices to find their way into making comics and opened new outlets for organizing their thoughts.

I have written this with the teacher/facilitator in mind – not to provide a lesson plan per se, but as an orientation to thinking in comics (at least from my perspective) and to provide reference points for potential facilitators to draw on for their own implementation. Therefore, I want to begin with some conceptual grounding. Scott McCloud (1993), building off Will Eisner's (1985) terminology, defines comics as, "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence" (p. 9). The reader stitches together and gives meaning to the sequence of static elements the author has assembled. This is time as a linear experience – a chain of events, one following directly after another. But, because comics are a visual medium, we cannot help but see the entire page and all of its separate elements all at once (Alaniz, 2003, p. 146). We thus make connections not just from one panel to the next, but across the page and back and forth, in all directions. Meaning, as Groensteen puts it, is braided together from all the assembled interconnected elements on the page – making comics a sort of directed network (p. 146). We can think about time too as being experienced simultaneously, for even as we are focused on our immediate activity, in our thoughts we reflect on past events and anticipate future happenings. It all occurs at once. The comics page allows for this conflation of multiple moments in time within its space. Time, in this static medium, is necessarily encoded in space. (See Bernard and Carter (2004) for a rich exploration of this "fourth-dimensional" view in comics.) The interplay of sequential reading and simultaneous viewing modes in a single form imbues comics with a unique dual nature (Sousanis, 2015, p. 62-3), one untethered from strictly linear narrative possibilities.

Thus, while comics often get compared to storyboarding, because of this interplay of sequential and simultaneous modes, they in fact operate in different fashion altogether. In comics, not only are we concerned with what goes on in each frame or panel, but we also need to attend to the size and shape of individual panels, their orientation, and their placement within the overall composition and relationship to other elements of the page (Miller, 2007, p. 83). Additionally, we might also find intentional use of empty space as well as elements in the liminal space between panels and across panels. Furthermore, even the notion of the discrete element called a "panel," while fairly commonplace, is hardly a requirement. The kind of border it is bounded by or the absence of a border altogether carries significance. Art Spiegelman refers to the comics page as an "architectonic" unit (Witek, 2007, p. 176-7), which speaks to an overlap between comics and

architecture. We might think of comics page as blueprint. The way in which we arrange the page and orient the reader's movement through it are essential to how comics convey meaning. Terrific examples of the connections between comics and architecture can be found prominently in the work of cartoonist Chris Ware (Ball & Kuhlman, 2010).

In order to get wheels turning about page structure, especially when working with participants with little to no experience with the comics form, I recommend that a facilitator gather a variety of comics pages showcasing vastly different compositional approaches, and if possible, create some examples with the interior contents removed leaving only the panel borders (and perhaps word balloon/text box borders) to isolate the role of composition on storytelling. I share here some content-removed samples that I use frequently: a classic Winsor McCay *Little Nemo* page where his bed grows and grows and walks around the city – wherein even with the panel content whited out, we can see how the very structure grows before returning to normal at the final panel; in the two examples from Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, we see a grid with a steady rhythm like a heartbeat or metronome and another that opens up and is fractured throughout; Frank Quitely's composition from *WE3* has an overlapping, frenetic nature – influenced perhaps by things like "bullet time" from the Matrix and video games. The page structure in each contributes significantly to the meaning within.

Let us pull our attention out from the comics and briefly take in our surroundings. From building exteriors to storm grates to the very way the rooms we inhabit are broken up by windows, blinds, fixtures, and other elements, this geometry of our built environment can serve as material to inspire ways in which we organize a comics page. Look at the arrangement of tiles and other features on the ceiling (or wall) and imagine these spaces being translated into music. Perhaps we hear a series of long regular notes, and then the slats of an air vent produce a quick staccato, before moving on to another region with its particular arrangement. Now transfer this thinking about architectural elements back to the layout of a comics page. The elements of the grid placement – size, shape, orientation, etc. all carry meaning, where, as Eisner (1985) wrote, "timing and rhythm are interlocked" (p. 25-37, 30). Comics offer a visual arrangement of time in space.

With all of this in mind, we can now get to the instructions for the exercise. I have split the explanation into two parts, though participants will likely perform both at the same time once they have heard the full concept. The only materials needed are a single sheet of paper – whatever size people have handy will do, and a pen, pencil, or any suitable marking instrument. For the initial step, ask participants to use their drawing implements to carve up the entire surface of this sheet of paper in grid-like fashion to represent "the shape of your day." They should think about organizing the time passages over that day, with its unique rhythms and disjointed moments, across the space of a page. The day one chooses to focus on can be that exact day, a typical day, a particularly eventful day, or some imagined day – though I think it works best if this abstract comic is grounded in one's lived experience. One important note – it is essential to use the *entire* sheet of paper. That is, if drawers want to leave some part of it blank that has to be done with intentionality. Unlike composing in text, where we might get halfway down a page and be finished, the negative space matters and contributes to the entire meaning.

While drawing blank comics grids addressed the issues of composition I was concerned with, I still felt like the exercise as a whole was missing something in terms of narrative content. I wanted people to be able to express more about the stories behind their day and still keep the drawing minimal. It so happened as I was coming up with this grid-making concept, I was out for a run and noticed that paint had splashed and spilled across the regular tiled boardwalk patterns beneath my feet. This made me think of my wife's abstract paintings – in which she captured her

motion and emotional activity in a direct splash of paint thrown on a surface. In a similar way, I could see these gestural paint splashes cutting through the regular grid as having the potential to convey narrative. In some sense, this representation of space and movement is comics at their most stripped down level.

So for the second aspect of the exercise, participants are to inhabit the grid of sorts they have drawn on the paper with gestural lines, marks of some sort that run through it to represent their physical or emotional activity within and across those frames of time. I would like to emphasize here to encourage participants to do their best not to draw representational things! Everyone should think instead about the kind of line, mark, or collection of marks that characterize their experience in the various moments marked off in the composition. We want to get at the core of crafting a comics page, how it moves and how it is organized, without being tied to preconceptions of what makes a “good” drawing. Compositional elements and the activity of making lines and marks are the primary focus here.

To summarize the instructions in brief: Take a single sheet of paper and carve it up to represent the shape of your day in grid-like fashion. The day one chooses to focus on can be that exact day, a typical day, a particularly eventful day, or some imagined day. Importantly, it is essential to use the *entire* sheet of paper – for empty space has great significance in comics. Then within this composition you have drawn, inhabit the spaces with gestural lines, collections of marks that run through it that represent your physical or emotional activity within and across those frames of time. Do your best not to draw things!

Discussion

I recommend facilitators allow about 10-15 minutes for drawing. Getting everyone to work quickly is important to prevent worrying about the accuracy of the drawing and heighten focus on the composition and the expressive activity of mark making. When time is up, participants will each share a brief explanation of their page, the reasons behinds the choices they made, what the grid represents, that sort of thing. Alternatively, consider starting by asking people to pair off and share with another person without offering any explanation, and have each partner offer an interpretation first before sharing with everyone. As a group, we want to take note of the different ways each person configures the composition, looking for similarities, overlapping approaches, and exploring the deliberate choices people make to organize their experience. The solutions they came up with to represent time passing in a certain way – say a rapid sequence marked by a series of tall, narrow boxes or some other structure – can serve as a point of comparison across the group, and invite a discussion around McCloud’s articulations and other references from comics makers to see how they solved similar issues. In my experience, results for the overall structure tend to be wildly diverse from more regular grids to loosely flowing structures to sometimes even spiraling creations. I have had participants make three-dimensional constructions and modified the plain surface of the sheet of paper in other unexpected ways. Even for those who say, worked in straightforward, rectangular grid fashion, we can see individual distinctions that can all be instructive in terms of thinking about how meaning is constructed on a page.

I am rather reticent to describe the exercise to an audience in too much detail or provide past examples for fear of guiding what the responses look like. The ones I share here are more for the facilitator to picture how the activity *might* go and to better understand how to set it in motion. In my explanations, I want to offer enough grounding so that participants are comfortable to proceed, but retain enough ambiguity so that they go in directions I have not anticipated – and this happens every time! I think the most exciting thing that I have seen is the realization as to

how much they already know about drawing and how working visually in this way opens up ways of thinking and representing their experience that they had not previously considered.

Beyond thinking about layout and composition, a primary takeaway from doing this exercise is to raise new ideas for approaching their own work and fundamentally question what it means to draw. Rudolf Arnheim (1969) wrote, "to see is to see in relation" (p. 54). For every time we look into the world, our eyes are making sense of things through the relationships – how close together two objects are, this in front of that, color contrasting with color, and so on. We cannot help it. Therefore, even the simplest of lines drawn across a surface creates some kind of response in the viewer. At its most basic, drawing is orchestrating relationships on a two-dimensional surface, which we then expand back into more dimensional experience in our thoughts. A simple example: from the very experience of living in the world, we know the difference between a jagged form and a curved one – each suggests different meaning. One hurts, the other we could rest our head upon. One is excited, the other calm. One I describe as "sharp" the other as "gentle." Even for self-professed non-drawers, lived experience tells us how to read marks, drawings, shapes, color, and more. Rather than identifying drawing with a particular sort of draftsmanship, let us instead consider drawing as organizing relationships between assembled elements. From this perspective, drawing becomes something accessible to everyone. I highly recommend Molly Bang's book *Picture This,* in which she looks at constructing the tale of Little Red Riding Hood in cutout colored paper to get at the metaphorical principals of drawing at the fundamental level of organizing metaphorical relationships. This leads to a corollary exercise I often do in conjunction with Grids and Gestures. The prompt is simple: draw a relationship that is significant to you (between you and another person, between two people you know well, between a group of people, between yourself and an institution – whatever participants determine is a relationship worth representing is perfectly appropriate). Use cutout colored paper if possible, but if not pretend as if you are working with cutouts when you are drawing. I find working with scissors can be liberating for students – it is hard to be too fussy and it lends itself to finding the essential qualities of a drawing. (In addition to *Picture This,* Matisse's cutout period offers great inspiration.) It might be as simple as two squares of the same color placed right next to one another or a circle and square sitting far apart. Of course, depending on the nature of the relationship and the imagination of the participant, this can and will produce all sorts of unexpected and insightful representations. While this exercise does not have the narrative movement that the grids exercise has, it similarly gets at how arranging relationships (quite literally) between forms can convey a great deal of meaning and just how much even a non-drawer understands implicitly about drawing. I can see this use of shape and color as metaphorical representation being taken back to comics and being used for more narrative purposes.

To close, I want to propose some additional complementary exercises. If there is time and materials available, doing Grids and Gestures with colored markers or pencils introduces a further multimodal aspect into the work. I think it would be quite generative to perform Grids and Gestures every day for a week or so to serve as a visual diary of sorts. One would see how the compositions have developed (or stayed the same) over that time span and witness the emergence of patterns both in their lives but in their ways of working as well. And finally, what I particularly like about "the shape of your day" as a prompt is that everyone has an example ready at hand and it offers a different outlook on the otherwise mundane. But obviously there are all sorts of narrative prompts that could similarly encode time within a spatial grid, and I would encourage developing other variations. I welcome hearing from those willing to share their versions with me!

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Comics artist and educator Nick Sousanis is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow in Comics Studies at the University of Calgary. He received his doctorate in education at Columbia University in 2014, where he wrote and drew his dissertation entirely in comic book form. Titled Unflattening, it argues for the importance of visual thinking in teaching and learning, and it is now a book from Harvard University Press. Please see his website: www.spinweaveandcut.com

A description of this exercise can be found in this video of my keynote at the International Visual Literacy Association conference at the Toledo Art Museum in 2014
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfQ0V_cWDkI
On my site here: http://spinweaveandcut.com/final-page-and-international-talks/