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Images, Speech Balloons, and Artful Representation: Comics as Visual Narratives of Early Career Teachers

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Images, Speech Balloons, and Artful Representation: Comics as Visual Narratives of Early Career Teachers

The ways in which teachers adjust to challenges in the process of becoming professionals are complicated. Interestingly, we have come to understand how the use of comics permits an unfolding of visual narratives within sequential frames as a unique way of contextualizing stories of teaching and learning. These visual narratives enable educational professionals to grasp the complexities of their professional actions and decisions through the unity created between form and content. This article discusses findings from a Canadian research project: *Pedagogical Assemblage: Building and Sustaining Teacher Capacity through Mentoring Programs in British Columbia[1]*. It explores the implications of comics as a mode of inquiry into teachers' stories of professional challenges and growth, by exploring the potential of comics for articulating and producing teacher narratives about issues of professional practice as encountered by early career teachers in British Columbia, Canada. Specifically, it focuses on using a/r/tography informed research methods in teacher mentorship through the development, creation and dissemination of comics. Central to this inquiry is the premise that visual representation through comics can provide teaching practitioners a reflexive and imaginative outlook into early career teachers' stories, and thus invite readers to ponder their own stories of becoming teachers in conversation with others. By employing a/r/tography informed research in the area of teacher mentorship within education, we hope to inspire further conversations in interdisciplinary venues by provoking discussions and creating new spaces for arts-based educational research in a broader educational arena.

A Brief History of Comics and Education

Growing recognition of comics in the broad field of education has been evidenced through the implications of comic books, manga and graphic novels in various teaching and learning settings across diverse age levels (Bitz, 2010, 2015; Kraver, 2013). Comics and cartooning as tools in education have a history that can be traced back to the early 19th century under the pen of Swiss schoolteacher, Rudolph Töpffer (Smolderen, 2014). Soon after the form of comic books emerged in the early 1930s, extensive studies of comics in the classroom were initiated and

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[1] *Pedagogical Assemblage: Building and Sustaining Teacher Capacity through Mentoring Programs in British Columbia* is a research partnership project funded by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada. It brings together the shared interests of the Teacher Education Office (TEO) at the University of British Columbia (UBC), the British Columbia Ministry of Education, the British Columbia School Superintendents' Association (BCSSA), and the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) to address the need for promoting, building and sustaining a professional culture of collaboration through teacher mentoring in the context of the British Columbia K-12 public education system. For more information, visit mentoringbc.ca

encouraging analyses linking comics to improved literacy appeared in journal articles throughout the *Golden Age of Comics* (Sones, 1944; Zorbaugh, 1944; Frank, 1949; Makey, 1952). However, falsified data produced by child psychologist Fredric Wertham (1954) linked comics to juvenile delinquency (Dorrell, Curtis, & Rampal, 1995; Tilley, 2012), and led to a virtual ban of comics in education. Ignored almost universally by elites and academia in North America during the *Silver Age* of the 1950s and 60s (Dorrell et al., 1995; Williams, 2008; Groensteen, 2012; Tilley, 2012, 2014), the comics medium nonetheless provoked scholarly undertakings in parts of Europe. For example, in 1962, burgeoning Franco-Belgian comics scholars and educators declared *les bandes dessinées* (the French term for comics, translated literally as *drawn strips*) to be the *ninth art* (Miller, 2007; Miller & Beaty, 2008; Groensteen, 2007, 2008) and acknowledged the medium's aesthetic and pedagogical capabilities (Andre, 1965; Fresnault-Deruelle, 1972; Roux, 1970).

During the 1960s and early 1970s, a market for adult comics was developing in France, which led to the creation of sequential narrative magazines and albums that portrayed mature themes such as sex and politics (Miller, 2007). Similarly, on the other side of the Atlantic, the *Underground Comix* movement in the United States provided revolutionary new understandings of comics in North America (Estren, 1974; Goldweber, 2013) due to their authors' "general defiance of convention and authority" (Goldweber, 2013, para. 1). The *Bronze Age of Comics* (1970–1985) spawned the phenomenon of the *graphic novel* (Williams, 2008) in America, a literary form which can be traced back to the European albums such as Franco-Belgian cartoonist Hergé's comic *Tintin in the Land of the Soviets* (2007) which was published in 1930.

During the *Modern Age* (1986 to 1999) the popular phenomenon of Japanese comics, known as *manga,* exploded across North America and Europe (Goldstein & Phelan, 2009; Groensteen, 2013). Growing academic acceptance of comics occurred in France during the 1980s (Groensteen, 2007; Miller, 2007, Williams, 2008) as left-leaning governments began funding "an apparatus of legitimization" (Miller, 2007, p. 31) that consisted of comics conferences, salons and schools. Additionally, early scholarship and theorizing on comics appeared in North America during the Modern Age, particularly after the success of *Maus* in 1992, which created new openings and understandings of comics as "a form of literature" (Groensteen, 2013, p. 76) and medium of self-expression (Bitz, 2009). Recently, a growing canon of scholarly works (Ayers & Alexander-Tanner, 2010; Madrid-Manrique, 2015; Sousanis, 2015) has signaled the cultural legitimacy of the medium.

Comics scholarship is a growing phenomenon, however the literature shows that current educational studies involving comic books and graphic novels predominantly employ them for reading in research of classroom literacy or

scholarly theorizing (Pratt, 2009; Syma & Weiner, 2013; Bahl, 2015) rather than creating comics texts as modes for meaning making. For instance, educator Jeraldine Kraver writes "we need to understand how the mode itself involves what …Scott McCloud calls 'making' comics… rather than scattershot approaches used to incorporate comics into discrete classroom lessons." (Kraver, 2013, p. 3) Therefore, we argue that understandings of "the language of comics" (Groensteen, 2007, p. 3) improve when scholars become writers *as well as readers* of comics, for it can be understood that literacy negotiates relationships between reading and writing (Collins & Blot, 2003). Although educator Michael Bitz's comprehensive *Comic Book Project* (2004, 2009, 2010, 2015) examines comics as a medium of self-expression by analyzing comics created by elementary and high school students, little research on comics in relation to education has explored the medium's potentiality for communicating and interpreting complex issues around teaching and learning (Pratt, 2009; Syma & Weiner, 2013; Bahl, 2015; Kraver, 2015). Furthermore, while certain educational uses of comics encourage children's self expression and learning (Bitz, 2009, 2010, 2015; Morrison et al., 2002), there is a lack of research demonstrating comics as a form of knowledge representation in relation to narratives of professional learning.

Feminist researcher Stephanie Jones explores her professional development as a scholar through arts based comics research, which she calls "graphica" (Jones & Woglom, 2013, p. 169). Jones, in collaboration with artist/educator James Woglom, tells "the story of how I came to present my research through a visual medium" (p. 169) and her discovery that research with comics "is a laborious but a generative one that allows me to think about research in a completely different way- through visual creation - that isn't limited to the language of words" (p. 188). Therefore, as comic's researchers, we draw inspiration from the growing number of emergent texts in comic forms that challenge conventional representations of academic research. In this article, we intend to explore and provoke new understandings of comics through our research in teacher mentorship. In ways similar to Bitz and Jones & Woglom, we employ comics as an artistic form within a/r/tography to analyze data and present new understandings. What follows is a discussion of teacher narratives and professional growth through the possibilities of comics.

Teacher Mentorship and Teacher Narratives

Teacher mentorship is key to creating and sustaining a strong profession of teaching (Kutsyuruba, 2012; Kutsyuruba, Godden, Matheson & Walker, 2016). Rather than seeing mentoring as an authoritative relationship between experienced and early career teachers, we consider mentoring as an interdependent and collaborative relationship in which teachers learn together to

inquire and refine their practice. Hence the experience of mentoring can be seen as a pedagogical space that attends to "a range of variations, directions, and destinations" (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 121) and enables the continuous unfolding of unexpectedness that provokes new possibilities. Such a space allows us to attend to the complexity of teacher mentorship, shifting the focus from the individual incidents of being competent to the relational practices where one teacher's growth evolves in the presence of another (Lin, Lawrence, & Irwin, 2016).

To articulate this complexity, we turn to teachers' narratives as they are "culturally provided stories about selves and their passage through lives that provide resources drawn upon by individuals in their interactions with one another and with themselves" (Sachs, 2003; p. 132). Narratives, as Gergen and Gergen (1988) point out, are "in effect, social constructions, undergoing continuous alteration as interaction progresses" (p. 20). Similarly, Groensteen (2012) writes that comics are constructed by drawing "instantaneous exchanges between text and image" (p.116), which he calls "narrative drawing" (p. 118). The narratives reveal teachers' unique professional experiences that entangle past memories and future aspirations. Thus, the narrative of becoming teachers is a framework for knowledge construction and sharing in teacher development because "stories provide a compelling basis for change or for affirmations" (Sachs, 2003, p. 132). Teachers' narratives help create a sense of collective belonging that connects teachers through "stories of practice" (Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995, p. 9) that enable communication and reflection (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998; Clandinin, 2006). However, for those teachers who are new to the profession and located in remote school communities, their stories of practice are often overlooked or silenced, leaving teachers to feel isolated in school communities and experience a low sense of belonging to the profession.

We contend that one method of overcoming the challenges of isolation faced by new teachers in rural communities is to expand the avenues of communication through comics. It is observed that narratives told in comic texts supplement collective belonging through their "easy locus for participatory culture" (Tilley, 2014, p. 3). Furthermore, as we consider narratives as social constructions that encompass the ambiguity and fluidity of becoming teachers, we contend that comics, as a visual narrative medium and form, are well suited to capture such complexity in both form and content. For instance, Jones & Woglom (2013) observe, "the composition and consumption of comics, then, might present a means of fostering comprehension of pluralistic points of view in a complex world." (p. 187) We now turn to our research to discuss our inquiry into comics as a unique narrative space for new teachers to articulate their teacher practice and growth, as well as a reciprocal space for the development of professional learning communities.

Methodology

An a/r/tographic informed methodology[2] suits the nature of this study, as it attends to the knowledge production space in-between research, art, and practice by underlining "a critical exchange that is reflective, responsive, and relational" (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. 106). It is a/r/tographically informed as we are immersed in a collaborative research team environment that is informed by the practice based nature of a/r/tographic research. Our participants are actively engaged in our qualitative research data collection (e.g. video/audio interviews) but are not actively engaged in a/r/tographic practices due to the sheer number of participants. In our case, comics as a form of creative arts serves as a mode of inquiry, as well as a form of knowledge representation, and provides insights into early career teacher's practice and growth. The methodology provides us an appropriate positioning to produce new relationships between creative arts and knowledge through biographical sequential narratives as research inquiry, collaboration and outputs.

Our data collection methods included semi-structured interviews as well as document reviews. We asked teachers in their first three years of teaching to share their experiences with the local districts' mentorship programs, and used documents provided by the teachers (e.g., photographs, lesson plans, and curriculum guidelines) to structure our interviews. Under the narrative analysis strategy (Cortazzi, 2014), we developed themes and identified narrative patterns as inquiry stances to lead our exploration of the essence of the stories. The sequentials generated in this study are supported by Democratic and Hierarchical Grids (Brunetti, 2011) and are similar to the pages of old *Archie* comics, thus "highly conventionalized in terms of look, layout, and design" (Beaty, 2015, p. 9) with a basic network of six panels of equal size dividing each page. The panels' signifieds employ basic comics grammar, such as insistent characters, speech balloons, and captions. The cartooning that transforms the teachers' stories into sequential narratives involves understandings of comics' semiotic systems (Lim, 2007; Groensteen, 2007) and of the professional practices in *Applied Cartooning* (Sturm & Bennett, 2014).

Following the data analysis stage, the script of each teacher's story was compiled by the lead researcher, and then drawn in thumbnail sketches created by

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[2] A/r/tography is a form of practice-based research steeped in the arts and education. A/r/t ography "renders research inquiries through artistic means" (Irwin, 2004, p.1). To practice a/r/togtaphy "is to inquire into a phenomenon through an ongoing process of artmaking and writing while acknowledging one's role as artist (a), researcher(r), teacher (t)" (Irwin, 2004, p. 1). A/r/tography is inherently about self as artist/researcher/teacher yet it is also social when groups or communities of a/r/tographers come together to engage in shared inquiries, act as critical friends, articulate an evolution of research questions, and present their collective evocative/provocative works to others.

the comics artist/researcher. Examples of thumbnail sketches created for *Katrina's Story: Mentorship Confidential* are featured in Figure 1. The lead researcher consulted with each participating teacher for accuracy, flow of sequence and narrative messages. The comics artist/researcher then strengthened the narrative, by making any necessary revisions or adjustments in the penciling and lettering stage (Fig. 2). The pencil drawings were again forwarded to the participant for feedback. Upon approval from the participant, the comics artist/researcher completed the art and text by inking and coloring (Fig. 3). The final artwork reached its completion once the participant again reviewed and approved.

It is worth noting that teacher anonymity is critical to this study. A number of the participating teachers expressed concern that some of the challenges they discuss in their comics could have implications on their careers, especially for those located in small rural communities. Therefore we employed pseudonyms and cartoon avatars (McCloud, 1994; Whitlock, 2006) to maintain participant anonymity. In other words, teachers tell stories, share experiences and communicate meanings as cartoon characters in comics. To make sure participants' voices are appropriately presented, our team members engaged in a long process of triangulating key data sources (e.g., interviews and field notes) and member checks.
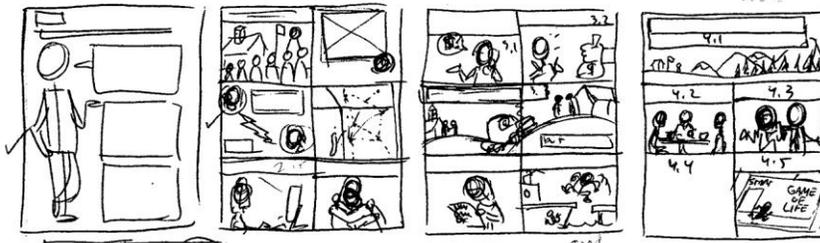

Fig. 1. Rough thumbnails created for Katrina's Story.

Fig. 2. Pencils created for Katrina's Story, Page 3.

Fig. 3. Inks and colours created for Katrina's Story, Page 3.

Blending Comics and Curricular Languages through Comics

With the intention of offering a coherent understanding of the teachers' comics, we first provide a macro analysis by investigating the possibility of merging comics and curricular languages in light of our mentorship comics; then continue with a micro analysis showcasing one of the stories in order to provide a closer look at our collaborative research process.

Comics scholar/practitioner Ivan Brunetti posits that the "empathetic doodling" (Horsman, 2015, p. 149) of cartooning is discovered in what he terms

the "*Five C's of Cartooning"* (Brunetti, 2011, p. 25): *composition; consistency; communication; calligraphy;* and *clarity*. Pedagogical links are forged by blending Brunetti's Five C's with curriculum theorist Dwayne Huebner's five-value framework for curricular language, which consists of: *technical; scientific; political; esthetic*; and *ethics* (Huebner et al., 1999, pp. 106-111). Definitions of curriculum cover a number of areas but, in the field of education, it can essentially be understood as "experience" (Breault & Marshall, 2010, para. 8) whereby the root word, *currere* (Pinar, 1975), propels "curriculum as verb instead of a noun" (Irwin, 2010, para. 1). As such, circumstances can be created in which to provoke broader experience and communication within communities of learning. Thus the circumstances created for our study materialize as interviews, field notes, workshops and biographical comics with which to share new teacher experiences. We suggest that blending empathetic and applied cartooning (Brunetti, 2011; Sturm & Bennett, 2014; Horsman, 2015) with thoughtful and considered curriculum theorizing (Huebner et al., 1999) can open opportunities for sharing and collaboration amongst educational stakeholders. Therefore, a pairing of Brunetti and Huebner's ten protocols into five groups of two can be visualized as: Technical/Composition; Political/Communication; Scientific/Consistency; Esthetic/Calligraphy and Ethical/Clarity.

Technical / Composition.
The Technical aspect of Huebner's value system with its "mobilization of material" (Huebner et al., 1999, p. 106) can be paired with Composition in cartooning. For instance, consider a comics page and the compositional considerations inside each of its panels' frames. These considerations include, but are not limited to, the placement of captions and speech balloons, camera angles and background displays, while "some effort of efficiency is made" (p. 106) towards a form of quality control. A Technical/Composition pairing of comics and curricular language addresses the "iconic solidarity" (Groensteen, 2007, p. 18) of the comics page whereby

> (e)valuation, from the point of view of the technical value system, may be considered a type of quality control…Evaluation, or inspection, also serves to check the quality of activities in the producing sequence. These activities may be improved or altered if the end states are not what they should be. (Huebner et al., 1999, p. 107)

Furthermore Thierry Groensteen (2007), in his *System of Comics*, writes that the comics page's composition or "mise en scène, therefore, organizes the different parameters of the image… in accordance with the internal dynamic of the sequence" (p. 120). For example, Page 1 of *Jenni's Story: Paperwork* (Fig. 4)

applies technical and compositional elements that involve braiding (Groensteen, 2007) of *Associating Elements* (AE) and *Visual Linking Devices* (VLD) (Lim, 2004, 2007) into relationships that engage the reader. These include visual metaphors of the story's title such as the stacks of paper to signify the large amount of paperwork this teacher encountered, and the inclusion of an insistent character as VLD, namely the teacher, Jenni, herself.
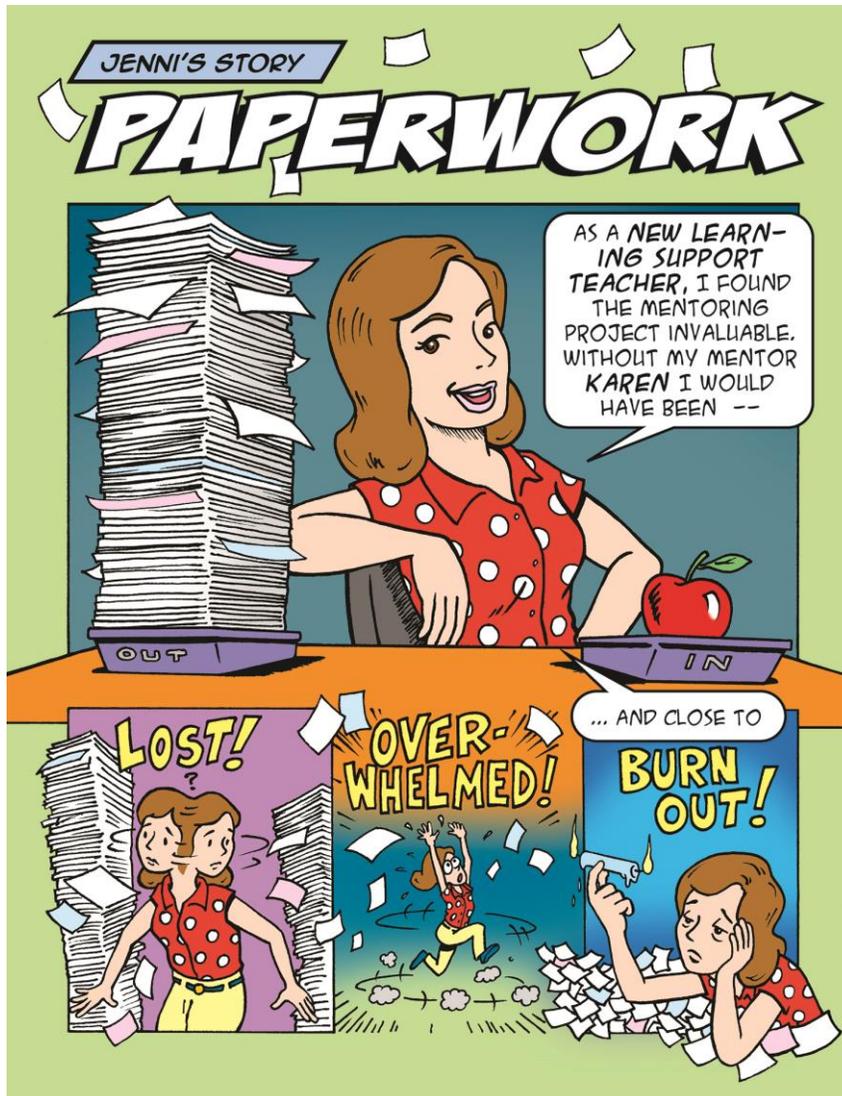

Fig. 4. Page 1 of Jenni's Story.

Political / Communication.

Political valuing exists "more often covertly than overtly" (Huebner et al., 1999, p. 107) in curricular thought and yet, as Huebner et al. writes, "all educational activity is valued politically" (p. 108). Victor Lim Fei (2004, 2007) posits, with the *Integrative Multi-Semiotic Model* (IMM) that for comics analysis, it is ideology that lays at the foundation of a comics text. The ideological framework of a comic is presented semiotically and deciphered through the language and images situated within the work's *Expression, Content* and *Context Planes*. The canon of significant graphic novels includes a number of works that contain both overt and covert political messages (Beaty & Woo, 2016) such as Art Spiegelman's (2011) *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi's (2007) *Persepolis.* Jenni's Story presents the central theme of broader communication when, on Page 1 (Fig. 4), the character of Jenni breaks the fourth wall and speaks directly to the reader. This is an approach that acknowledges a political *écriture féminine* (Cixous & Clément, 1986; Taylor, 2013) that strives to communicate with the other, as when Helene Cixous advises authors to attend "to the gaps" (Sellers, 1996, p. 16). This attention to the gaps can refer not only to the gutters between the contiguous panels of the comics page, but in the liminal spaces between author and other, writer and reader. As such, a comics author invites the reader into the narrative by writing beyond the self. The direct communication Jenni's character extends to the reader braids (Groensteen, 2007, 2013) and flows (Lim, 2007) with the narrative when, on the last page (Fig. 5), Jenni is once again speaking directly to the reader through a megaphone.

Fig. 5. Page 4 of Jenni's Story.

Scientific / Consistency.

Scientific valuing is important to Huebner as new discoveries and "more precise knowledge" (Huebner et al., 1999, p. 109) become incorporated into the curriculum. He also writes that "educational activity may be valued for the knowledge it produces about that activity" (p. 108). For instance, the comics produced for the *Pedagogical Assemblage* project generated new understandings of teacher mentorship as we prospected the data for information with which to build narratives. As such, Kyle's Story features an interesting observation in the establishing shot of Figure 6/Panel 1. Kyle is depicted as a disembodied head floating above the story's setting and narrating to the reader, "In Haida Gwai, we

prefer to use the term 'Teacher Collaboration Project' rather than 'Teacher Mentoring Program'". Substituting *mentoring* with *collaboration* complicates and questions understandings of mentorship as professional practice. Additionally, Kyle enlarges his perceptions of mentorship and collaboration by describing the acquisition of new art techniques, which he incorporates into his art and teaching practice. Furthermore, images of Kyle's art are also situated visually within the sequential narrative's rhizome. Thus a satisfying and consistent sense of wholeness develops through multimodal communication amongst a team of researchers, teachers, and artists.
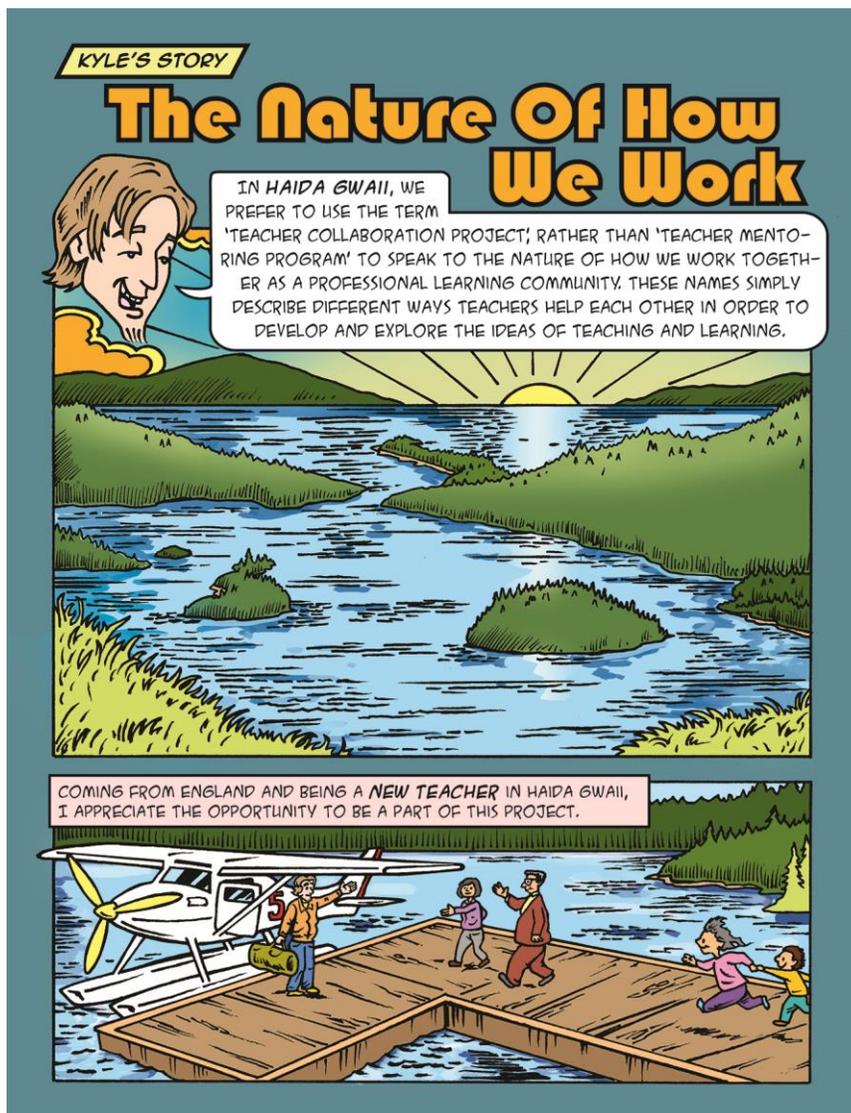

Fig. 6. Page 1 of Kyle's Story.

Esthetic / Calligraphy.
Huebner et al. (1999) write that esthetic valuing "is often completely ignored, perhaps because… esthetic activities are not highly prized today in society" (p. 109). He identifies three dimensions of Esthetic valuing: psychical distance (which is an apartness from materiality and consumption); wholeness and design; and symbolic meaning. Meanwhile, Brunetti (2011) states that the qualities of calligraphy in cartooning "are a clue as to what makes one's particular visual handwriting different or unique, and these should be embraced" (p. 26). Brunetti's approach to cartooning involves "simplicity, clarity and elegance" (p. 34) as goals. He writes that, "we experience the comics page both as a whole and as a sum of its parts: moreover, 'form' and 'content' are not just inseparable, but actually originate inter-dependently" (p. 45). Huebner et al. (1999) write, "the esthetic object may be valued for the meanings that it reveals" (p. 110). While composing Page 3 of Kyle's Story (Fig. 7), the comics a/r/tographer requested an example of the teacher's artwork. The teacher was delighted and provided several images of works he had created while teaching in a rural British Columbia community. Thus two examples of Kyle's work (Figs. 7 & 8) are situated esthetically within the calligraphy of the pages.
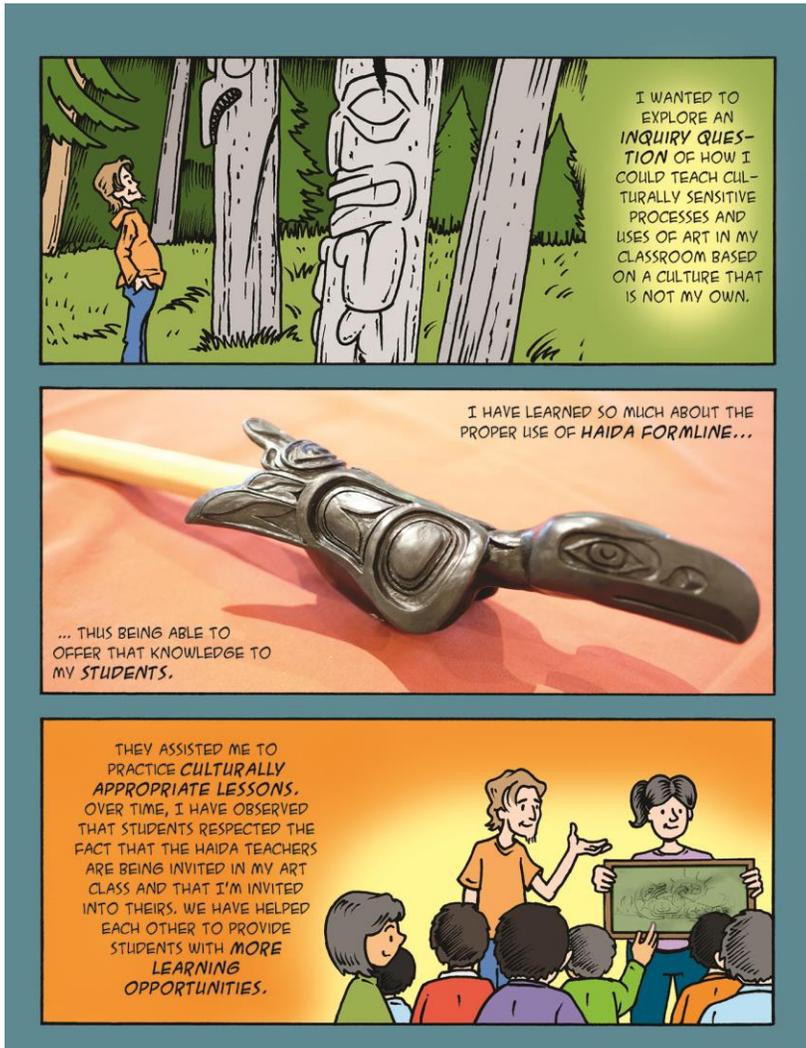
Fig. 7. Page 3 of Kyle's Story.
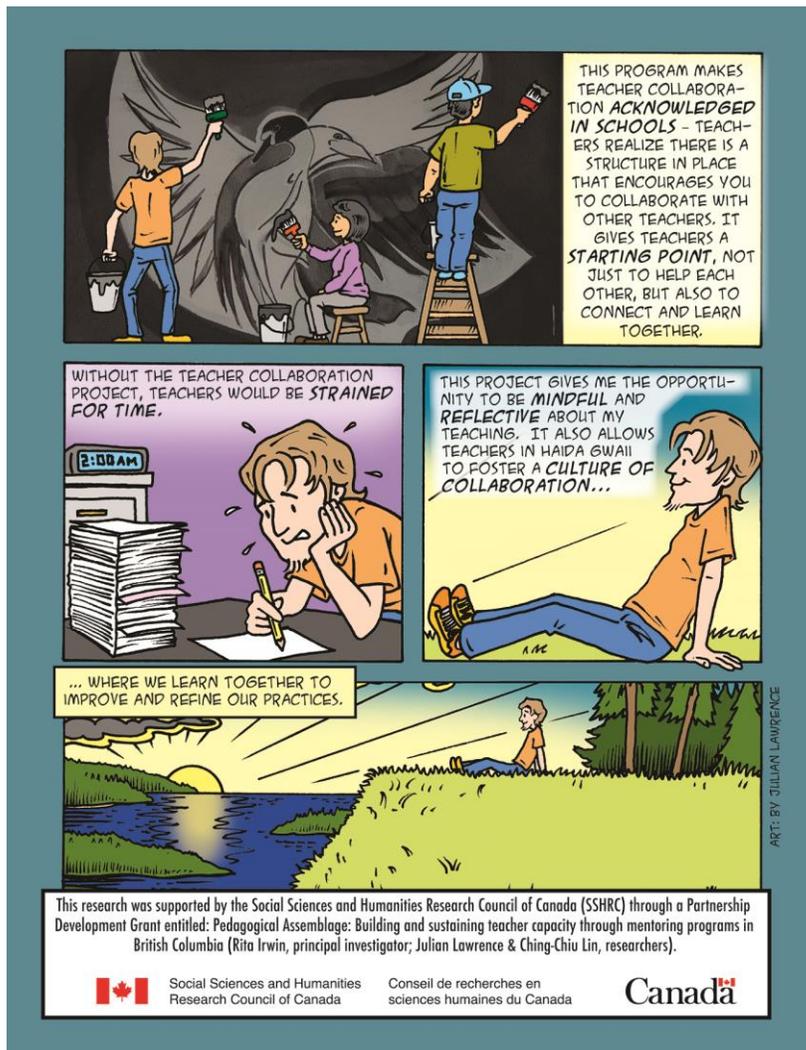
Fig. 8. Page 4 of Kyle's Story.

Ethical / Clarity.

Ethical value in curriculum, according to Huebner et al. (1999), "is viewed primarily as an encounter between man and man" (p. 110) whereby the "student is not viewed as an object, as an *it*; but as a fellow human being" (p.110, italics in original). Similarly, Sellers (1996) reminds us of feminist scholar Hélène Cixous' advice that writers avoid solipsism and attend "to the gaps" (p. 16) in order to "prevent constructing the self in a position of mastery" (p. 16). Therefore, comics' scholars/practitioners "must take care not to jar the reader out of the narrative, inadvertently severing the reader's identification or empathy with the character(s) or story" (Brunetti, 2011, p. 49). For example, the character of Jenni shares her vulnerability with the reader by expressing her feelings, as well as describing the

methods she employs to overcome the challenges she encounters in her profession. Through Jenni's Story we discover that asking questions, networking with colleagues, and keeping communication open are some of the ways by which new teachers can grow professionally.

Our macro analysis merges comic and curricular theorizing in an attempt to present teachers' narratives through "the connections between images and written language to form a broader communicative whole" (Cohn, 2016, p. 7). Our discussion shows that the intersection of comics and curricular languages enables us to understand teacher narratives from a fresh perspective, as well as to connect with the broader audience in professional learning communities. The collaborative comics we created are designed to share and communicate new teachers' experiences in rural school communities. The teachers' narratives benefit from cartooning's "empathetic doodling" (Horsman, 2015, p. 149) and communicate reflexively and reflectively with the reader. Furthermore, applying a curricular value-system to a comics' ideology, whereby "knowledge has more than power, it has beauty" (Huebner et al., 1999, p.116), enriches discourse and opens avenues to explore complexities of teacher practice. In the following micro analysis, we focus our lens on one new teacher's experience and the techniques we employ to communicate his story in comics.

The Portrayal of Kyle's Story

The *Applied Cartooning Manifesto* asks, "What if our work is about not only a sense of identity… But also a sense of community?" (Sturm & Bennett, 2014, n.p.) The theme of building community through cartooning and collaboration emerges in the narratives of the Pedagogical Assemblage project's comics, which opens new possibilities for scholarly research (Beaty, 2011; Baetens, 2013). These biographical comic stories permit researchers and practitioners to unpack and understand the complexity of teacher mentorship through the images, texts, and multimodal engagements of comics. As a result, the sequential narratives contribute as a form of inquiry into these contextualized understandings of teacher collaboration through the mentoring program. The following case study showcases a sequential narrative developed from Kyle's interviews, stories and collaborations.

Kyle's story, which is entitled *The Nature Of How We Work*, details the experience of a first year secondary visual art teacher. The narrative explains Kyle's participation in his school district's teacher mentorship program in the remote Indigenous community of Haida Gwaii, British Columbia, Canada. Following a reading of the pages' words and images, Kyle's reflection, in the final panel of Figure 8, provides a space that invites teachers to contemplate their own teaching in the early years of practice and appreciate the richness of teaching

in rural school communities. In Figure 6/Panel 1, Kyle says, "in Haida Gwaii, we prefer the term 'Teacher Collaboration Project' rather than 'Teacher Mentoring Program' to speak to the nature of how we work together as a professional learning community." We find ourselves therefore questioning the uses of language around the discourse of teacher mentorship, especially when deeper analysis reveals the non-hierarchical, reciprocal and collaborative characteristics embedded in Kyle's experience. Thus, comics provide a narrative space to articulate this unique way of rethinking teacher mentorship through teachers' authentic stories.

Our research team's analysis of the data begins with an attentive reading and transcription of Kyle's interviews. The original verbatim transcript numbers fourteen single-spaced pages and our team works together to extract the "nuggets of information" (Anderson & Thomas, 2014, p. 1) nestled in the raw data. In this way the pages are edited into a 500-word narrative whereby themes and new understandings are brought into sharper focus. For example, through a team effort the second edit of Kyle's interview transcript clarifies the importance of the aforementioned "teacher collaboration" and highlights the core value of collaborative inquiry embedded in Haida Gwaii's teacher mentoring program. Kyle, as well as other participating teachers, are considered in the texts as the author's "fictitious speaker: the author function is carried out and operates in the scission itself" (Foucault, 1998, p. 215) of the narrative. In this research, teachers' interviews are transcribed and adapted into comics whereby their voices are communicated through the mask of an avatar or cipher such as a cartoon character. The hybrid teachers/characters in our research comics narrate "meaningful dimensions of their worlds when they can explore them through creative arts, including comic books" (Bitz, 2004, p. 575) in print and online (www.mentoringbc.ca). In other words, teachers' voices communicate playfully as anonymous cartoon characters sharing lifeworld experiences with each other and the reader.

Another example is found in Figure 7/panel 2. This particular panel ruptures the established cartooning protocols of the narrative to present a photograph of Kyle's artwork. The hybridity of comics allows for text and image to complement and reinforce underlying themes. As such, a representation of Kyle's artwork serves to reinforce and support the narrative. Kyle explains in the text that he has "learned so much about the proper use of Haida formline…Thus being able to offer that knowledge to my students." Kyle's words are positioned as two captions that surround a photograph of his Haida-inspired work. We can untangle the complexity by pointing to this new avenue of collaboration whereby teacher generated art embellishes and adds to the comic's sequential narrative and discourse semantics (Lim, 2007). In this instance, the participating teacher, Kyle, was happy to supply art and forwarded several examples for our team to include

in the comics. Beyond supplying narrative text, Kyle's artwork serves as a critical visual clue that helps readers to understand the social and cultural elements that underlie the entanglement of professional collaboration and teacher mentorship. This mode of comics production provokes a conversation about *collective authorship* in which a team of contributors is representative of the collective voice of the artwork (Groensteen, 2012; Rippl & Etter, 2013; Uidhr, 2012). Kyle's experience of mentoring is transformed into comics by transcribing, editing, sketching, thumbnailing, penciling, revising, lettering, inking, colouring, laying out, printing, and uploading as sequential narratives. Participating teachers like Kyle collaborated throughout the entire process by offering feedback and ideas with each iteration. This collective effort allows us to recognize the collaborative action required in the networks of professional learning communities, thereby inviting teachers to reflect upon and learn about their practices.

Audience Responses of Teacher Mentorship Comics

To understand comics' potentiality in the research areas of teacher mentorship, we turn to audience response to discuss how comics can be utilized to support and strengthen teachers' professional growth. We incorporate feedback from the teachers we portrayed, as well as teachers and school administrators who had read the comics.

Inviting and Articulating Reflection through Comics
Teachers' memories of their first few years of teaching can be a collective experience, yet these memories are rarely shared among all teachers. Some teachers might feel that sharing such stories is a sign of weakness or incompetency, whereas some could not find the right channel to tell their stories. Katrina (Figs. 1-3) was willing to share her story with us because the form of comics gives her an anonymous voice. In other words, the comic form provides a safe space for Katrina to take a reflective stance on her first year of teaching and offers a solution to her dilemma. Thus Katrina's fear of being potentially identified and her desire to share her struggle and change with other teachers who may have similar experiences in their early career phases are reconciled through the anonymity and discursive strengths of comics. As a result, Katrina's comic story was well-received and was published as a condensed two-page version in *British Columbia Teachers' Federation Magazine* in 2015 (with a circulation of 50,000 copies).

We have gained momentum as Katrina's story helped invite additional early career teachers to participate in our study. When informed that teachers have been inspired by her sequential narrative about her practice, Katrina said, "I know how isolated and powerless it could be for the first year of teaching. I'm glad new

teachers out there can relate to my story, that they are not alone, and there is support out there (personal communication, January, 2015)." In a sense, Katrina's comic story reveals a unique dimension of community building through cartooning whereby a sense of belonging develops when the narratives of community members are voiced, exchanged and communicated. This unique sense of community then becomes intensified through the potential of comics. We can characterize these potentials as accessibility and reflexivity.

Accessibility is the most common theme that has emerged from our analysis; comics' accessibility enables the need for advocacy in promoting and strengthening teacher mentorship. As Devon, a district mentoring coordinator puts it, "Comics tends to be a more playful medium: it's accessible and welcoming, rather than if it's a very academic, structured format that seems untouchable and authoritarian." She elaborates,

> When you're working in mentorship advocacy and awareness, you're often working with trustees, policy makers, or administrators who probably don't have much background knowledge in these areas. Having something that is accessible and concise to ground the conversation around the issues is crucial (Devon, personal communication, July, 2016).

While Devon considers mentoring comics as a tool to spark conversation with administrators, Karen, an elementary teacher appreciates the vibrancy that comics bring to the teaching profession. She says,

> It's almost surprising when you open it up and oh wow, it's a comic. It's concise and feels you are on a journey with that person. You understand the message and the reality of those new teachers' situations, but in a way it's fun and energetic and encourages you to rethink the negativity of that experience. It's a fairly quick read and yet you still have that deep understanding because you could relate to their struggles or experiences as a teacher. Having something that has a meaningful message but in a lighter format is just refreshing and appreciated (Karen, personal communication, July, 2016).

The accessibility feature of new teachers' comics thus reveals the reflexive nature of teacher narratives, in which they make sense both to the individuals who voice their stories and to others who may identify similar experiences (Noddings, 1991; Sachs, 2003). In fact, the blended text and visual narratives appear to intensify the reflexivity that the reader has experienced. The cartoon representations of characters and locations invite readers to reimagine, and thus share their own stories with the larger teaching community. Kyla, a teacher and

district professional development chair, believes comics enable teachers to reflect on their own practice in the context of mentorship. Kyla describes:

> Comics are a very accessible way to tell true stories of new teachers. They invite people in. They communicate the message so powerfully. They help teachers see other teachers in different contexts of teaching, which may help teachers to see themselves reflected in others' stories more, rather than if you just gave them a written description of the program. Then they might be more likely to sign-up or seek out mentoring programs in their districts (Kyla, personal communication, July, 2016).

Entering and Provoking Conversation through Comics

The potential of comics invites both reflection and dialogue in the context of teacher development. Portraying new teachers' stories through comics offers "a synergy between visual and text; the interplay between the two provides opportunities for fostering deeper understanding that flows in between the pages" (Devon, personal communication, July, 2016). We consider teachers' exchange of stories about their professional practice as an act of reflection that further invites the reader's reflection. Teachers' comics as visual narratives offer dynamic and personalized stories that differ from the generalization or assumption of the lives of early career teachers. It provides opportunities for teachers to examine their practice and communicate with each other, permitting teachers to "think aloud in the company of colleagues" (Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995, p. 88). Furthermore, reflection stimulates dialogue; in a sense teachers' visual narratives act as a provocation for inquiry into rethinking teachers' practice in relation to a culture of collaboration in professional learning communities (Grosz, 1995; Honan, 2007). Lisa, a school principal and a mentorship steering committee member describes how comics help initiate conversation in her district's mentoring workshops:

> There is not much time to delve into a lot of text materials during our mentoring training sessions. The comics have been effective in communicating ideas and providing real examples to our teachers – almost feel like a soundboard for teachers' reflection and for our group conversation. One of the comics is a first year teacher's journey in our district; it provides a quick snapshot into how this new teacher got through the year with the support from a mentor. We used this comic in our training session to discuss the role of a mentor and the relationship between the mentor and the mentee. Our teachers responded to it very well because they understand the isolation and challenges described in that story (Lisa, personal communication, July, 2016).

Responding to the implication of comics in teacher mentorship, Devon refers to our infographics work (Figures 9 & 10) and suggests, "comics could be a useful tool for exploring our assumptions and our understandings (personal communication, July, 2016)." She further explains,

> When you work with mentors and new teachers about the potential benefits of the work we do together, you need to have the conversation to establish the shared values. This infographic, which summarized the benefits of mentorship in two pages, can be a good tool to stimulate such a conversation. It's personalized and authentic. Interesting that comics is a medium that has not been taken seriously in our culture in the past. However, in the context of teacher mentorship, it allows a bit of space and playfulness for the conversation that can sometimes be about very serious issues (Devon, personal communication, July, 2016).

Fig. 9. Page 1 of Infographic

Fig. 10. Page 2 of Infographic

Unexpectedly, one of the comics led to a mentor's joy of being appreciated. Laura is a program coordinator who read our comics and then connected us to Jenni, a new teacher in her district. Laura shares Jenni's mentor's response after reading Jenni's comic story:

> Jenni's mentor told me that she was deeply moved by how Jenni described the impact that she had, and in fact, it brought her to tears. The mentor also told me that she felt so honoured that she had played this type of role in somebody's life that she was so excited to share this comic with her parents, who were retired teachers, to say: look at what somebody said

about the impact that I've had on her teaching career (Laura, personal communication, July, 2016).

Conversations around the comics help validate the fact that teachers' professional relationships can have an impact on their practice, as well as outline the benefits of the mentoring program. Laura puts it, "As a program coordinator, Jenni's comic is validating to think what the program could offer to make a difference for teachers" (personal communication, July, 2016).

As Gergen and Gergen (1988) suggest, "the telling of the story is not so much the act of an independent individual as a result of a mutually coordinated and supportive relationship" (p. 40). Furthermore, narrative is "a product of relationships" (p. 41), whereby we witness comics not only as a language that understands individuality, but also a mode of inquiry into teachers' collective stories of challenges and professional growth that situate reciprocal relationship building among professionals who are engaged in practice together. As Devon, a district mentoring program coordinator describes,

I think it's neat to witness how comics can harness the power of the narrative. Through this sort of mosaic of comics, we have seen a rich collection of various teacher narratives that highlight the diversity of our province, as well as lived experiences in the teaching profession. (Devon, personal communication, July, 2016).

Such an inquiry, through comics as teachers' visual narratives, invites teachers to experience imaginative insight into new teachers' stories, to reflect on their own experience of becoming teachers, to provoke conversation around educational issues, and to articulate the complexity of pedagogical relationships among teachers and their professional learning communities.

Final Remarks

Our use of an a/r/tography informed methodology in teacher mentorship offers an alterative way of mobilizing research knowledge by provoking artful representation in articulating the complexity of teacher practice and by demonstrating the potential of comics to illustrate particular insights in the study of educational phenomena. Our experience with the *Pedagogical Assemblage* research project strengthens our belief that comics can promote knowledge construction by sharing stories of teachers' professional development in ways that are playful, inviting and validating. Through our research methods, we have witnessed the potential of comics to promote and strengthen teachers'

professional growth through community building, and by engaging audiences to effectively link ideas and actions through multimodal representations within collaborative exchanges of knowledge. Thus the teachers' various sequential narratives create a sense of community that unite teachers, and further encourage reflection and dialogue. The comics created for *Pedagogical Assemblage* blend cartooning's innate empathy with the values of progressive educational curriculum. As a result, our motivation to employ comics as research outputs is built upon "the necessity of a methodology being practice, process, and product" (Sinner, Leggo, Irwin, Gouzouasis, & Grauer, 2006, p. 1225) whereby the product of a reflective practice and collaborative process generate products (in this instance comics) that attempt to form a broader communicative whole.

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