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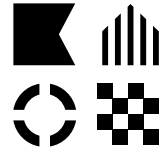


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# What Do You See? Using the Graphic Novella to Challenge Stigma

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 [{Desenho / Drawing} & Comics]



## Abstract

This paper disseminates a student graphic novel project to the challenge stigma against people with complex needs. The project was a collaboration between Northumbria University 2nd year illustration students and Fulfilling Lives, a charitable organisation that helps vulnerable people to rebuild their lives. Fulfilling Lives' work also includes outreach work with local social service providers to enact system change in their attitudes and policies to people who they define as 'difficult clients.' They believe in the value of the voice of people with complex needs, and they wish to amplify that voice to rebuild lives by enacting positive social change. Fulfilling Lives challenged the illustration students to use illustration to help amplify those voices. This paper focuses on the pedagogy behind how the students' produced their graphic novellas, and on the students' processes and reflections. It also disseminates the impacts of the ERDF funded project that published the graphic novellas in an anthology. The students' illustrations in this book and eBook formed the core material for a social media campaign via Twitter, to provoke dialogue on the stigma against people with complex needs in society using the hashtag #WhatDoYouSee? It will conclude with discussing the early positive impacts of the students' work, and some of the dialogues that the graphic novel project has already provoked.

## Keywords

Illustration, Visual Communication, Pedagogy, Constructivism, Graphic Novels, Social Media, and Complex Needs.

## 1. Introduction

Chris Ware believes that what illustrators do with comic strip illustration is to "take pieces of experience and freeze them in time [...] The moments are inert, lying there on the page [...] you make the strip come alive by reading it, by experiencing it beat for beat" [1]. Art Spiegelman of *Maus* fame, states "that graphic novels can provide stories and images from where history and the personal past can collide" [2].

This paper will examine the empathic development of Northumbria University's BA(Hons) Graphic Design illustration students' ability to challenge stigma using graphic novellas, and the constructivist pedagogy that facilitated it. It will discuss how the students interpreted a segment of personal history and a lived experience of someone living with complex needs, and used strip illustration to challenge its stigma within society. Through the Creative Fuse North East project we received grant support from the

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European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) towards a Social Media project, where the students' graphic novellas were published in an anthology for Newcastle-based organisation Fulfilling Lives' outreach work.

## **2. The Stigma of Complex Needs**

The project client was Fulfilling Lives, a national programme funded by The Big Lottery Fund, to improve support services in Newcastle and Gateshead for people with multiple and complex needs. At Fulfilling Lives' heart is the belief that the lived experience of people who have complex needs, has to be voiced and become part of a holistic solution to coordinate social services to help these people to improve their lives.

'Complex needs' is defined as people exhibiting at least two of the following conditions: homelessness, current/historical offending, problematic substance or alcohol misuse, and mental ill-health. The failure within the existing social services to effectively support people with complex needs because they are seen as 'difficult clients,' arises from these people being stigmatised and excluded from social support and society. The Fulfilling Lives programme supports these people to re-engage, and existing social services to ensure they are offering appropriate and tailored support for their complex needs.

Fulfilling Lives is formed by a core partnership of Changing Lives, Oasis Aquila Housing and Mental Health Concern. They are working together in an eight-year programme to achieve its goals, and to help Newcastle and Gateshead and its social services to see people with complex needs for the potential they have, rather than for their complex problems. In readdressing this stigma, the programme will over time contribute to reducing the significant social and economic costs associated with complex needs, and improve the lived experience of these people.

People with ill-defined complex needs, often referred to as 'hard to reach,' find it more difficult to engage with social services. They find that specific services may not fully understand the breadth of their issues, and therefore their holistic needs are not met. Additionally, they may become frustrated by a lack of services or the un-coordination of available services. This frustration in a lack of understanding and support for people living chaotic lives can lead to a downward spiral of mental ill health, substance misuse, crime, offending, homelessness and exclusion. This is destructive on the person and society itself then is negatively affected.

Fulfilling Lives is a proactive organisation to enact change in the person and the social support system that needs to support them, and to bring about such a 'System Change' they reached out to Northumbria University's School of Design to aid their work. They believe it is very important to value and amplify the voice of people with complex needs as they are 'Experts by Experience.' Fulfilling Lives want to challenge what is often seen as a negative "story" of social problems in life.

So, by collaborating with illustration students from BA(Hons) Graphic Design, they provided them with two interviews of two people with complex needs about their journey through life. The students then interpreted their lived experiences into five short graphic novel stories. In turn, these il-

illustrated graphic novellas were published in a printed and eBook anthology to be used in future Fulfilling Lives outreach work, and formed the content for a social media campaign to challenge stigma by provoking dialogue on social media, through Twitter #WhatDoYouSee? memes.

### 3. Literature Review

The modern graphic novel medium offers what Jacques Ranciere [3] would see as a democratisation of the characterisation and staging of non-elite themes in narratives. Baetens and Frey believes that there is a “growing thematic diversity” [4] in the medium, with more diversity emerging (than mainstream super hero titles would suggest) where women and minority voices can express themselves through their stories [5]. The drawn line within a strip, they argue, displays “a story world in which the act of drawing cannot be separated from the drawn result” [6]. Raeburn suggest that “emotional meaning” [7] can be arrived at through an intersection between the structures of what’s drawn and what’s written. The drawn line can inherently suggest “authenticity and intimacy” [8].

Joe Sacco, renowned for employing the comic strip as award-winning journalism describes what is drawn on a page as always “interpretive even when they are slavish renditions of photographs” [9]. Wolk calls this “cartooning as interpretation” [10], and Pedri discusses how the style of drawing “presents readers with a particularly personal vision of what is remembered as having been experienced” [11].

The graphic novel medium of sequential panels melding illustration and words, as a medium that “highlights its own artifice” distancing itself visually from any “*reality* it attempts to capture” [12] in its storytelling. The use of panels and the gutters between them on a comic strip page divides the plot into visual narrative points, which also can divide the *durations* of time or the *dimensions* of space [13] to explore a lived experience narrative in non-linear ways. A sequentially drawn story emerges from each page from its intersection between novel storytelling elements and graphic representations of characters, locations and actions that define its difference to “other media” [14].

The graphic novel medium affords author/illustrators to use the medium for autobiographical narratives. Sattler argues that because it can on each page make “memories visible [allowing those] memories to be encountered - not objectively, but as a matter of feeling,” inducing a “virtual observer memory” that facilitates in the reader a phenomenological feeling of seeing “interior recollections” visually being brought to life [15]. Baetens and Frey suggests that within drawing a strip narrative, the drawing of characters is symbiotic with the drawing of their environmental contexts that shape them [16]. The emotional dimension within a strip narrative (whether autobiographical or not) created by the directness of drawn panels in combination with any written textual elements, demonstrate the maturing of the graphic novel to tell more personal narratives. The medium’s strengths can break down for a reader “seemingly unfathomable and complex [issues] into a more manageable and human form” affording itself to tell smaller and more localised narratives [17].

A graphic novel's panels and gutters provide "a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments" which the reader connects to "mentally construct a continuous, unified reality" [18]. As Joe Sacco says, an illustrator "assembles elements deliberately and places them with intent on a page" [19], and in doing makes the reader connect a constant stream of choices regarding imagery, pacing, dialogue, composition" [20] to read the story. This can be referred to as the 'mise en page,' guiding the reader's attention to fluctuate "between a vague and general impression of the entire page" and each illustrated panel, to read the narrative [21]. Together the panels provide the reader with "a sense of time's passage" [22] within the storytelling.

The narrative norm in mainstream comics is to use speech bubbles, diegetic sound effects, and panel boxes to convey and advance the written story and the action in coordination with the illustrations. But if this text is absent (or at the barest minimum) it can still facilitate the reader to fill in the narrative blanks, guided only by the illustration within the layout of the frames on each page that can be "more atmospheric, more enigmatic" [23].

A 'silent strip' can provide a "space of sensitivity and also directness that can appear clichéd in the novel and especially in film" [24]. But more importantly, a strip narrative explicitly confronts the reader visually with each character's body and face, displaying "not just his or her thoughts, but his or her bodily appearance" [25]. Graphic novels offer a powerful medium in which to visually communicate stories of individual lived experiences, to phenomenologically engage readers in encountering voices who seldom can express themselves through other media. In the next section, we will detail how our illustration students used graphic novellas to tell hidden stories.

#### **4. The Narrative and Social Commentary Module**

The graphic novellas were created and illustrated in early 2017, as part of a second semester module called Narrative and Social Commentary. The 2nd year illustration students were tasked with visually communicating two Fulfilling Lives' client's testimonies using three different narrative structures.

Firstly, the students storyboarded one testimony as a straight narrative, following the interviewee's meandering story between their recovering present, their desired future, and their troubled complex past. Secondly, from this master storyboarded experience, each student selected one prominent experiential moment to animate to reinterpret in a new storyboard to make a 10 second animation.

The final stage was for the students to re-interpret the Fulfilling Live's clients' story in a completely new direction. The students explored sequential illustration as a narrative form, using a 12-page graphic novel format, while maintaining the "emotional meaning" [26] of the essence of the interviewee's lived experience. In most cases it was the first-time students had worked in the graphic novel genre.

Taking inspiration from Mark Madden's 99 Ways to Tell a Story [27], students were introduced to the language of sequential imagery. Each student then wrote and illustrated a new narrative employing their indi-

visual drawing styles to explore how they could suggest “authenticity and intimacy” [28] through illustration.

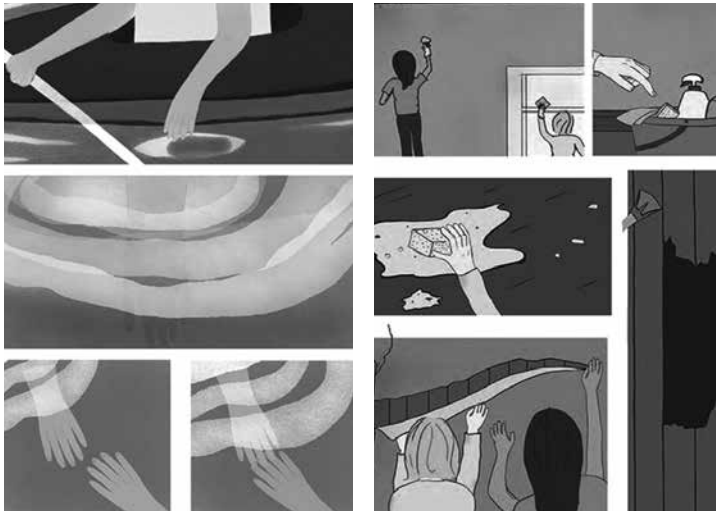
The students analysed a variety of key graphic novel exemplars, both past and present such as Windsor McKay, Shaun Tan, Chris Ware, Jon McNaught, and Richard McGuire. By decoding these illustrators’ approaches and techniques, the students began to understand the importance of the grid (and breaking it), composition, pace and flow of panels [29] while also considering their own assigned narratives to develop.

To help the students to begin, they were encouraged to return to the source audio interviews to find visual ‘hooks’ that could spring an idea. They had learned this illustration technique in the previous semester while working on an editorial illustration project. These ‘hooks’ emerged from repeated listening to the interview and re-reading the transcript.

The ‘hooks’ to help them in developing a new visual narrative came from keywords, phrases and also metaphors that the interviewees used themselves in describing their experiences. Students then drafted and redrafted rough illustrated sequences of panels, and from this process they discovered the challenges of successful Visual Narrative Grammar employing Arcs and Peaks within their storytelling [30].

In regular group crit discussions, as their work was based on a real lived experience that had an ‘owner,’ they realised they had a responsibility as illustrators to translate difficult facts and truths while respecting the lived experience of the interviewees. Some of the students during the crits engaged in debates on the degree and implications of their level of responsibility in the graphic novella they create. The students all acknowledged a sense of underlying pressure to do this project properly, knowing that their graphic novellas would eventually be viewed by the original storytellers. This made the students keen to do their best with their interpretations of the source material.

Most students elected to use minimal or no text/speech within the panels. This made them increasingly aware of how hard the visual content needed



**Fig. 1.** (left) Flatwater High panels (© Georgie Mosley, 2017).

**Fig. 2.** (right) The Clean Up panels (© Sarah Chambers, 2017).

to work to engage and direct the viewer through each page turn, making sure the correct message was delivered. In one novella, a lived experience of a confidence building canoe trip inspired a predominantly textless atmospheric and enigmatic [31] visual metaphor for a moment of catharsis (see Fig. 1).

In another novella, an interviewee's wish for a home was reinterpreted using a metaphor of home decoration narrative, where the 'mise en page' [32] represented both the support that Fulfilling Lives provides and how people with complex needs can learn to improve their life skills (see Fig. 2).

One illustration student took a meta-narrative approach to reinterpret the narrative. In his novella, the interviewee only appears as a side-



**Fig. 3.** Josh Cooper  
27/03/2003 panels (©  
Angus Martin, 2017).

character in another character's story, in which fictional teenager Josh Cooper shoplifts for the first time, potentially taking his first steps to a darker future. During the shopkeeper's pursuit of the young boy passes down an alleyway, they pass the interviewee's character shooting up without a thought. This pivotal panel "visually confronts the reader with the [anonymised] character's bodily appearance" [33] and "places

them with intent on a page" [34] to narratively suggest one possible future path for the Josh Cooper character (see Fig. 3).

## 5. Illustrating People's Life-worlds

In order to facilitate the students understanding of what complex needs are, and what are the implications of living with complex needs within society, the pedagogical approach we took with the students was a constructivist one [35]. By employing a constructivist teaching approach, we opened the students up to phenomenologically examine a lived experience full of complexity and pain for themselves, to construct sequential illustrated narratives that interpret another human's lived experience [36].

Through drawing their new narratives, each student presented to the reader their interpretation "of what is remembered as having been experienced" [37]. From their understanding of alien situations and motivations that were not their own. The graphic novellas encouraged the students to form an authentic social commentary voice that emerged from them challenging their own social and creative comfort zones.

The students developed their own commentary over twelve weeks through drawing and discussion [38] in weekly group tutorials. We challenged the students' imaginations, in responding to real testimony from two of Fulfilling Lives' clients who live with complex needs (anonymised to ethically comply with university procedure), to understand the life-worlds that the two interviewees existed in [39].

To do this effectively the students researched into drug use, drug dependency and rehabilitation, into mental health services and other new

life experiences that were personally out of their own personal experiences. In storyboard panels pinned to our crit room walls it became very apparent in their first attempts at visually interpreting and storyboarding the interviewees' stories, that the students didn't have any idea about what a homeless hostel room or dormitory looked like. Their early sketches looked remarkably like their own halls of residence bedrooms.

This led to deeper critical discussions and provided a catalyst for the students to research beyond the provided written and audio testimony, to understand and empathise with people who experience a different life-world to themselves. This emergent understanding of complex needs was channelled into their graphic novellas, resulted in short stories that had a greater empathic depth and emotional maturity than their first narrative storyboards. In most of the graphic novellas, the students fashioned sophisticated visual metaphors in order to challenge society's prejudices and stigma of people with complex needs.

## 6. Disseminating Anti-Stigma Narratives

After the 2<sup>nd</sup> year illustration students created their graphic novellas in the Narrative and Social Commentary module, through Creative Fuse North East we received grant support from the ERDF to enable us to fund two illustration-based collaborative Social Media projects, the first of which<sup>4</sup> (Jan-May 2018) was for Fulfilling Lives as discussed in this paper.

The Fulfilling Lives representative selected five novellas that would be most relevant to his organisation's outreach work, to form the core of a printed graphic novel anthology and eBook (a new illustrated cover and introduction strip were later commissioned). This graphic novel anthology, published in May 2018, would then be used in future training workshops with the regional social service organisations. As part of a Twitter summer campaign called #WhatDoYouSee? selected illustrated panels from the anthology's strips formed the content for tweeted visual memes.

The intention of this social media campaign was to use illustration to provoke a dialogue through the hashtag around the subject of complex needs. The tweeted visual memes would provoke responses and drive visitors to the Fulfilling Lives website. There the visitors could read the full eBook version of the strip, and then seek further understanding of complex needs from the links on the webpage. Fulfilling Lives would also use the hashtag #WhatDoYouSee? as the title of the graphic novel anthology, so when they would use the printed book in their outreach workshops it would also generate post-workshop discussion on social media.

As well as this ultimate dissemination, the students learnt early on to disseminate their emerging anti-stigma narratives. Within the module the representative from Fulfilling Lives visited the students three times. The first time was in January 2017 to brief the students, then he attended twice more for student presentations, halfway through the semester for guidance and critical feedback, and at the twelfth week for final presentations.

<sup>4</sup> The second Fuse-funded project worked with Rape Crisis Tyneside and Northumberland on a separate illustrated book and social media campaign (May-Sep 2018).



During these client presentations, the students presented had the chance to gain feedback on their work-in progress and benefit from an expert's point of view on their interpretations of complex needs.

In the autumn of 2017, after the module work was completed and as we prepared for the formal tendering to begin to employ a design company, early dissemination of this first Fuse project's work was made at the UK's Graphic Design Educators' Network (GDEN) Sheffield conference. An interesting discussion followed the short Pecha Kucha presentation, with one GDEN member questioning political motivational bias within the illustrators' social commentaries. They questioned the students' 'voice' in the graphic novellas, and whether it was authentically the students' own views on complex needs that were being expressed in the strips. He was concerned whether the social commentary was unduly influenced by any teaching staff-biased political *-isms*.

As the illustration teaching staff used a constructivist pedagogical approach [40], the students developed personal ownership of their social commentary positions. As their own understanding of people with complex needs developed and emerged from engaging in illustrating strip narratives, they developed their own authentic voice. In this way, their graphic novellas spoke up on behalf of some of society's most vulnerable people.

As staff, we would also argue that in this project any *-ism* that a student let influence their work was a position of *humanism*. They came to see the *human* behind the stigma within our society, a fellow *human* struggling with complex needs who needed help. To be able to challenge the stigma in society through illustration as "virtual observer memory" [41], the students first challenged their own prejudices to create some very moving stories for others to read.

## 7. Conclusion

So, in conclusion what has this Fulfilling Lives project achieved in regard to challenging stigma against people with complex needs? How has the pedagogical approach taken in the module facilitated student learning? As outlined above, a constructivist pedagogical approach facilitated the students' personal understanding of the consequences and empathy, for people with complex needs struggling within our society, emerged from their own dialogue and research into the subject. The publication of the #WhatDoYou-See? graphic novel anthology coincides with the writing of this paper, and its social media campaign will then be launched during the summer of 2018.

As further dissemination of its impacts will need to be revisited in 2019, this paper has demonstrated how constructivist pedagogy and the graphic novel format, can facilitate students to challenge their own prejudices first to then tell stories from society's fringes. The Fulfilling Lives representative arranged to show the two interviewees, who kindly consented for their testimonies of living with complex needs to be used by the illustration students, the five selected strips for the anthology. The two interviewees were excited to see that they were being listened to, and that their testimonies were worth attention of someone visually retelling their lived experiences.

“Vanessa,” one of the two interviewees made a statement at the end of the graphic novel anthology: “I think our society should take more responsibility for both the harm it causes and the help it offers.” The illustration students, in producing their graphic novella narratives in their own authentic voices, have risen in a creative way to that collective societal responsibility. In doing, they are using the power of illustration to help Fulfilling Lives to challenge society’s stigma on vulnerable fellow humans.

## Acknowledgements

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