

Cross-Disciplinary Learning and Teaching Initiative
The Art of Storytelling and the Teaching of Graphic Texts
Summer 2012: Final Report

Workshop participants

Breckenridge, Janis (Coordinator)
Corkrum, Dalia
Hurlburt, Sarah
Leise, Chris
Lincoln, Justin
Roberts, Katrina
Semerdjian, Elyse

Workshop description

Graphic novels—hybrid literary and visual works engaging diverse themes of historical, social and aesthetic import—readily lend themselves to cross-disciplinary study. Participants in this summer workshop studied a cross-cultural set of innovative graphic texts.

This group was composed of six faculty members representing five departments across two divisions (English, Foreign Languages and Literatures, History, Spanish, Studio Art) together with Dalia Corkrum, College Librarian. We engaged in a cross-disciplinary study of contemporary graphic works that address such topics as self-consciously representing the Holocaust in comic format, employing techniques of the mystery novel to trace racial identity in America in the 1930s, drawing on oral testimony to uncover genocide in the Middle East, rendering a graphic exposé of the uses and misuses of the creative arts, combining literary realism with comic art, and creating genre-bending illustrated poetry. Dalia served as a resource person throughout the workshop, setting up a CLEo site and providing information about the historical development of the graphic novel as a genre and its acceptance within literary, library and academic circles. While all sessions included discussion of teaching graphic texts, the final meeting focused specifically on curricular and pedagogical issues related to library acquisitions as well as the successful incorporation of graphic novels in the liberal arts classroom.

The goals of this faculty workshop included becoming familiar with the rich and multicultural history of this hybrid literary/artistic form, engaging in close analysis of the many ways in which visual imagery and verbal text interact, and discussing cross-disciplinary approaches to teaching these complex texts. Following this workshop, participants have stated their intention to incorporate graphic novels and comic theory into their teaching, their portfolios, and/or their scholarship.

The workshop was supported by a CLEo website that Dalia Corkrum set up for the group. Dalia included numerous resources on this site—from our reading schedule to essential vocabulary for discussing comics and graphic texts. She further created a comprehensive resource guide that pointed the way to reference works and scholarly journals on the topic, museums, and awards in the comic industry. In addition, throughout the summer many participants posted valuable reading materials that helped to contextualize the works under discussion. I strongly recommend the use of such a CLEo site to anyone planning to coordinate a future CDLTI and I remain ever grateful to Dalia for suggesting this to me and then voluntarily taking charge of its creation.

Practical Matters

Participants met for six regular sessions in order to discuss specific graphs texts and their role in the classroom. These regular meetings, which took place at Olive, lasted two hours with each participant having selected the material for that session and taking responsibility for leading the conversation. A final seventh session—hosted by Dalia Corkrum in the new 3rd floor staff space at Penrose—took the form of a collaborative roundtable discussion around more broader topics such as library acquisitions, Whitman curricula, questions of pedagogy, and successful exercises for incorporating graphic novels in classroom discussion. This final session lasted three hours. Thus the group met for a total of 15 hours over the course of June, July and August of 2012.

Given the large size of the group (6 faculty and 1 staff) scheduling seven meetings times during the summer was quite a challenge. Although I began this process early, I found that I needed to remain flexible and adjust as participants' plans materialized or changed. I would caution that anyone coordinating a summer workshop should expect scheduling to be a challenge.

Workshop syllabus

June 15, 2012 Led by Janis Breckenridge

Foundations: Self-Conscious Inquiry and Committed Comics

•Speigelman, Art. *MetaMaus: A Look Inside a Modern Classic*.

June 19, 2012 Led by Chris Leise

Exploring the Mysteries of Racial Identity and Tension

•Johnson, Mat and Warren Pleece. *Incognegro*.

June 22, 2012 Led by Elyse Semerdjian

Comic Journalism: Drawing on Oral Testimony to Uncover Buried Truths

•Sacco, Joe. *Footnotes in Gaza: A Graphic Novel*.

July 20, 2012 Led by Sarah Hurlburt

Literary Realism and Comics Art

•Larcenet, Manu. *Ordinary Victories 1-2*.

August 9, 2012 Led by Justin Lincoln

The Art of the Graphic Novel

•Dave McKean. *Cages*

August 13, 2012 Led by Katrina Roberts

Poetic Considerations

•Harvey, Matthea and Amy Jean Porter. *Of Lamb*

August 16, 2012 Collaborative Roundtable Discussion

Reflections on Teaching the Graphic Novel

•*Teaching the Graphic Novel* ed. Stephen E. Tabachnick. Selections.

Reflections from Participants

Corkrum, Dalia

Participating in the CDLTI examining the use of graphic novels within the Whitman curriculum was very productive and proved to be a successful experience for me. Not only did the workshop encourage creative inquiry into the possibilities of cross-disciplinary teaching and learning, we were able to explore librarian-faculty collaborative opportunities. The intellectual discourse provided me with a better understanding of the role of the graphic novel in a number of academic disciplines and helped shape insights regarding future collection development activities to support teaching and learning with these types of materials. Reading the works and participating in challenging and insightful discussions with my faculty colleagues also helped me gain a deeper understanding of the nuanced approach each has to reading, research, and teaching. Important questions regarding intellectual property, inter-library collaborative collection development efforts, and librarian support for faculty teaching and learning were also explored.

From our conversations, it became even clearer that there is need for copyright instruction for both faculty and students. The interdisciplinary nature of graphic novels will serve well as a basis for some of that instruction. Bringing in examples of the challenges presented by these materials will help illustrate difficult copyright concepts.

Participation in this CDLTI also provided an opportunity to expand library holdings in the genre. Using both monies supplied by the grant and the library's acquisitions budget, we were able to add over \$1000 worth of materials to the collection. Having the opportunity to study with this group helped inform collection development decisions and helped me select items that were immediately useful for the group. The CLEo site I created for the group will provide a long-term resource for our CDLTI participants and, I hope, will continue to be developed to reflect on-going research and teaching with graphic novels.

Janis Breckenridge did a masterful job organizing the group, keeping the conversations flowing and providing subtle leadership that contributed to the success of the endeavor. If ever there was an opportunity to work with her again, I would enthusiastically welcome doing so.

I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to participate and hope that future CDLTI groups will include librarians among their members.

Hurlburt, Sarah

This is my second experience with a cross-disciplinary group, and I am truly grateful to have had this opportunity to explore so much graphic narrative material in neighboring disciplines, with colleagues with such different backgrounds. At this point, having just concluded the sessions, my strongest impression is that of the cross-disciplinary learning impact of these workshops on the actual participants. These groups have given me windows into other faculty's areas of research and expertise, tips on teaching different genres or critical goals, and a sustained intellectual interaction that greatly exceeds the (also valuable) snapshot format of faculty forum. I anticipate multiple consequences for my classroom, but at the same time this is going to be a slow feed. All of us in the workshop incorporate graphic narrative into our regular loads, without necessarily ever teaching an entire course on graphic narrative. Our teaching discussions were all the more interdisciplinary because of this blending of formal and contextual questions with our "regularly

scheduled programming."

In some ways, the workshop has been a teaching workshop, and working with these colleagues has been a window into how they lead discussion, how they pitch a text and when they stand back. This in and of itself has been a lesson in teaching, and I am sure pieces of these discussions will inform my own classroom for semesters to come.

The participation of the library in this group was invaluable. The issue of collections is key to all of our research and teaching, and we had more than one productive conversation about the material issues involved in incorporating this work. We did not resolve these questions, but I think that the group itself represents a significant positive step in faculty-library communication about collections questions.

I will have the opportunity to participate in another cross-disciplinary group this coming year on the topic of languages across the curriculum. I think that the issues and possibilities for collaboration raised in the graphic novel group are going to very productively inform my participation in the languages across disciplines group.

Leise, Chris

I found this to be a highly successful group inquiry and I imagine it will inform my teaching for years to come. It was great to read such a wide variety of texts, many of which I would not have been drawn to on my own. Primarily, I developed a far keener sense of the usefulness and limitations of Scott McCloud's seminal theoretical text *Understanding Comics*. This is a text I consulted heavily in presenting to the Encounters faculty on *Maus*, and one to which I refer on a regular basis in classes on the graphic novel. In particular, it was helpful to see McCloud's system tested through the lens of multiple disciplinary approaches. I am still pondering the normative assumptions imposed by European reading practices that comics can expose and unsettle.

Moreover, I learned a good deal about the nature of the Arab/Israeli conflict by reading Joe Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza*, as well as the complexities of understanding the concept of these (and other) national identities. Tracing connections between this history and the tense race relations in the US is particularly useful for me in thinking about Mat Johnson & Warren Pleeces's *Incognegro*, a text that I intend to teach regularly. There's something really odd about seeing the American Civil Rights moment juxtaposed against the evolution of modern Palestine. I'm also going to consider including Kenneth Patchen's poetry in my survey of 20th-century American writing. Finally, it was really valuable for me to consider the boundaries between the genres of poetry and prose when more pronounced visual components of representation were introduced to writing than line breaks and typography.

I'm really pleased with Janis's direction of this group and grateful for everyone's contributions. If there was a limitation in organization, it was one only visible to me in retrospect: I think inclusion of someone with expertise on visual/cognitive processes would have helped me better understand how we see and assemble lines and color into meaningful images.

Lincoln, Justin

The interdisciplinary Graphic Novel group was the fourth official interdisciplinary group project I was involved with in the past couple of years, and the fifth such group if one also counts the

New Media Seminar organized by David Sprunger and Jennifer Mouat this past Spring. It was the second Summer workshop that involved Janis Breckenridge, this time in the role of workshop coordinator.

Janis was perhaps the most organized workshop leader of any of the groups in which I participated. While she gave all members control over the readings that they covered, she planned the group well in advance and stuck to the plan. We spent less time coordinating “where and when and who and why”, which speaks highly of both her abilities and the way that CDLTI has begun to mature in format. Perhaps CDLTI is getting past a stage of “growing pains.”

Our weekly meetings corresponded with morning or afternoon sessions at a café, which led to an open arena for discussion. This capitalized on the same method used in the previous Summer to great effect. I was very pleased that Dalia Corkrum, head of Penrose Library, joined the group and offered the use of the library’s new meeting room for our final session. I think that it is important for staff to participate along with faculty in these kinds of situations. I really value her insights and appreciate her interest in our research.

This workshop involved the use of a different text or texts for each of the seven sessions. This gave us some variety in terms of what material we covered, yet this seemed to really under-represent the field of graphic novels and comics. (This is not to mention web comics, which I don’t think were addressed while I was in attendance.) I think that a more continued focus on comics and how one learns from and teaches them is very much merited.

I typically use a text on comics to talk about line quality and page layout in my Visual Arts Practices course. I found it very interesting to bring ideas from the author of this text, Scott McCloud, considered by many as one of the authorities on the medium, to the group. Unlike my students who often say his ideas opened their minds to new ways of thinking, the majority of this group saw little of value in his ideas, considering them overly reductive. It’s interesting to put these ideas to greater critical scrutiny. However McCloud’s book *Understanding Comics* still ably serves the purposes for which I use them in my art class.

The most interesting part of any of our discussions was during our final session where we talked about how cross- disciplinary manifests itself in our teaching and research. Perhaps that is a very “Meta” type of discussion to have in this context, but I think that after being involved in several of these groups I am curious about what impact it has on the campus culture at large. I think that after a couple of years of doing these workshops, we should discuss with a larger group of faculty and students what we have observed and learned. Doing this would most likely not impinge on the continuance of the CDLTI program, but it could help steer them, and make better use of our collective learning.

Thanks to Janis for suggesting and leading such an enjoyable and informative group. Her investment in this subject is very palpable and I wish her great success as she continues her research and teaching on this subject. It was a wonderful means of gearing up for the academic semester and connecting with faculty and staff outside of our departments.

Roberts, Katrina

These past months, Janis Breckenridge facilitated a valuable sequence of workshops led by a

committed group of colleagues from across campus; each participant shared rich individual insights from within his or her specific discipline to launch unexpected (and fascinating) collaborative thinking. I've been struck by the spectrum of intelligent, challenging ideas that arose throughout our summer's inquiry, and have been curious to acknowledge and discover places and ways in which our approaches differ and converge. This workshop has also provided an opportunity for me to recognize and appreciate the tremendous expertise of individual colleagues in other disciplines, and to benefit from an invitation to adopt and adapt their perspectives and approaches for my own teaching and research. I'm also always pleased to share with others the relevance and power of poetry across disciplines.

Janis initiated our inquiry with questions about the foundational methods of graphic novelists. Our discussion not about Art Spiegelman's iconic work *Maus*, but instead about *MetaMaus: A Look Inside a Modern Classic* prompted for me powerful considerations about "authorial intention and aspiration," about archetypes and stereotypes; about how and why a writer navigates what's shown and what's told in a narrative, and about pacing and spacing – in particular, how graphic/visual design communicates in tandem with written text, and how visual representation/form communicates on its own. I pose similar sorts of questions to my poetry students as they explore lineation, the shape their thinking makes in the air and on the page, the formal choices they address when writing, etc. In the graphic novel, frames and pages often function as poetic "stanzas" (related to the Italian "rooms") and I find interesting the ways we are asked to enter and inhabit the lyrical worlds established visually and textually by graphic novelists.

It's also been compelling to consider the catch-all name "graphic novel" and to recognize how vast and varied the genre is. More often than not, the works we shared together this summer resembled memoir, travelogue, or reportage, though there were also examples of fictive narrative and poetic sequence. Clearly, the graphic novel is a form that invites serious inquiry in all disciplines; it is not simply art for art's sake but instead, a gritty medium within which to explore powerful political, sociological, historical, as well as personal, questions.

During our sessions, I was pleased to revisit with Chris Leise Mat Johnson's and Warren Pleece's *Incognegro*, and to discuss issues of race and representation. I especially have valued our collective consideration of Joe Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza: A Graphic Novel*, and am grateful to colleague Elyse Semerdjian for introducing ideas concerning the capacity for this genre to encourage and convey oral testimony and an uncovering of buried truths. "Comic Journalism" seems to me to be a striking way to introduce students to powerful issues about objectivity and choices of framing when telling stories, and as well, calls us (through bold graphic means) to renegotiate our expectations for a single "truth."

Both in my teaching and research, I'm especially interested in issues of point of view; I've found contemplation of Manu Larcenet's *Ordinary Victories* 1-2, in a session led by Sarah Hurlburt, to be abundantly rewarding, and I've appreciated the global perspective and extensive knowledge of *bande dessinée* Sarah's brought to our table. I'm drawn to the lyrical aesthetic and subtlety of the French graphic novelists.

I've enjoyed having the opportunity to share with colleagues from across campus a challenging poetic text from within my discipline (*Of Lamb*, Matthea Harvey and Amy Jean Porter)—to see

what sorts of unexpected revelations beyond literary analysis might emerge, and as well, to complicate the definition of “graphic novel.” Its long history of illumination and experimentation with concrete representation, its pressure on formal choices (questions of lineation, spacing, etc.), its use of juxtaposition, its recognition of the power of what’s not said/what’s left unspoken; its emphasis not only on what’s said but the shape taken in saying it—make poetry a (perhaps surprising yet) cinematic genre closely related to methods of the graphic novel. My own ongoing inquiries (both pedagogic and scholarly) into poetic appropriation and erasure have had opportunities to deepen and widen, thanks to colleagues who’ve shared with me their perspectives in our discussions.

Similarly, this workshop has provided me space to continue consideration of ideas set in motion during my spring Abshire fellowship discussion and work with artist Sam Alden. I remain interested in “how image means” and how written and visual images can stand alone and speak together – in the contexts of children’s picture books, in graphic “novels,” and in memoir, artists’ books, journals, and poetry.

I envision continuing to incorporate visual texts in all of my writing and literature workshops and seminars, and I’m grateful for new windows into unfamiliar texts this workshop has provided. I’m grateful, too, to Dalia Corkrum, for her generosity in expanding our library holdings to reflect the interests of this faculty group, and for her valuable perspectives about the texts we shared this summer; I hope to see her create a designated space within Penrose for graphic novels.

Certainly, I see the possibility (using graphic novels) of working in the future to create writing courses that might be cross-listed in any number of areas. Similarly, I can imagine inviting colleagues from this group with expertise in other disciplines into my own future workshops with students to share perspectives, for instance, on contextual issues and methods: perhaps Elyse (from Division 1) might visit one of my workshops to discuss the power of history framed through “fiction,” or to share ideas about the politics of “truth” and point of view; perhaps Janis might come to share with a future memoir workshop of mine ideas about witness and testimony; perhaps Justin Lincoln from the Art Department might come to share drawing instructional perspectives with students in a future iteration of my “Notebooks/Visual Journals” course; perhaps Sarah might come to introduce consideration of ideas about translation (among other things)!

Based on Chris Leise’s expression last year of interest in Mat Johnson’s fiction, I’ve invited Mat Johnson to participate in this year’s Visiting Writers Reading Series—so students in Chris’s literature classes, students in Creative Writing classes within the English Department, as well as students in classes taught by my colleagues from other disciplines, and others on campus and in the greater community who share an interest in “mysteries of racial identity and tension” will also incorporate this graphic novel from our collaboration in classes and discussions this year, and will take advantage of the opportunity to engage with Johnson when he visits campus.

These workshops continue to open doors for me in the way they invite cross-disciplinary discussion that otherwise might not have had the space and time to occur; I’m excited about how our pedagogic resources deepen when pooled in this way. Thanks very much to Whitman College for supporting this sort of inestimable faculty interaction.

Janis created a good rigorous syllabus; we met regularly despite the challenges of summer scheduling. Members came prepared to discuss our shared texts, and as well, provided rich tangential resources for further reading. I valued everything about this workshop and would be eager to participate in future explorations (and/or a continuation of this one) with any of these dedicated colleagues.

Semerdjian, Elyse

Our workshop on the graphic novel was a successful beginning to a cross-disciplinary conversation about the role graphic novels can play in the Whitman curriculum. Each participant presented a graphic novel of their choice, typically from their area of teaching. The composition of our group was mostly from Division II; I was the only person from Division I. I do think that graphic novels are challenging to teach within my discipline and for that reason I will continue to work on teaching techniques in my classroom. How, as an historian, can I strike a balance between form and content in the graphic novel and still be grounded in the discipline of history? As an historian who teaches early to modern Middle Eastern history, I continue to find myself attracted to graphic novels that function as memoirs (*Persepolis*) or as journalism (Joe Sacco's *Palestine* and *Footnotes in Gaza*). I teach the occasional graphic novel in my Middle East courses in order to make the history and the region of the Middle East more accessible to an American audience. I have taught *Persepolis* for years, but recently began to use Joe Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza*, a text that uses historical documents and oral histories to recreate a massacre that took place in Gaza in 1956. I will be using a newly published text coauthored by Joe Sacco and Chris Hedges, *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*, in my Arab Spring course in Fall 2012, specifically the final chapter of it that focuses on the Occupy Wall Street Protests. In our interdisciplinary workshop, I learned from faculty representing different disciplines across campus especially the visual aspects of reading the graphic novel that have been challenging for me as an historian who naturally gravitates towards the text more than image. There were several participants who had strong grounding in graphic traditions (Chris, Sarah, Janis, and Justin), so this was an opportunity to not only learn about graphic novels but about different graphic traditions (American and French) and new ways of reading from my colleagues. I wish there had been an opportunity to read some of the Spanish graphic novels that Janis teaches, but not all of us had the Spanish to engage those texts. One of the most enlightening lessons in the graphic tradition was graphic poetry introduced by Katrina in the form of *Of Lamb*, a subversive retelling of the "Mary had a little lamb" nursery rhyme. The text is the product of a technique called "erasure" that I was completely unfamiliar with, but will not soon forget. Reading the text generated a discussion about the original publication from which the erasure was performed and the implications this technique may have with regards to intellectual property and copyright law.

In one of our sessions, I introduced *Footnotes in Gaza* by Joe Sacco, a text I have taught before in my Hist 322 "History of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict" course. The work is a piece of graphic journalism, and I have always taught it with a more documentary sensibility. However, I was able to gain new insights into the text with my colleagues who read the images in ways different to my own. For example, the group was able to interpret the meaning of walls and the arrangement of frames and gutters in a way that I had not perceived them before. Along with gaining new insights into the text, almost every session was full of references and material that extended beyond that day's reading. Our table was often full of texts that we would never read during our short time together but could certainly make reference to and read in the future. Dalia

created an entire candy store display of graphic novels for our last session; I checked out two of them from the library immediately. Through this process of exchange, I learned about other texts that I may be interested in adopting in the future. One text Dalia displayed was *Zahara's Paradise*, a graphic novel about the 2009 Iranian protests, an event that is viewed by some scholars as a precursor to the Arab Spring. I am currently examining the book in hopes of excerpting a section of it that represents the street protests, arrests, and executions of political prisoners from summer 2009. Sarah introduced me to a text called *The Photographer* that intersperses actual photographs of a deceased photojournalist who spent extensive time in Afghanistan with cartooning that fills in unphotographed aspects of the journalist's life. The photographs are stunning and certain to provide a balance of art and document that could be useful in teaching the conflict(s) in Afghanistan. Finally, I also learned about the work of R. Crumb who illustrated *The Book of Genesis*, which is adaptation of the original using the actual words of Genesis reinterpreted visually. I plan on introducing this text the next time I teach Encounters, specifically his representation of the binding of Isaac since I already use various representations of this scene as depicted by The Gutenberg Bible, Caravaggio, and Islamic manuscript paintings in the *qasas al-anbiya* tradition.

I learned many new pedagogical approaches from my colleagues and from *Teaching the Graphic Novel*, ed. Stephen Tabachnick that will be useful in my teaching. Reading *Metamaus* in particular answered many questions generated from teaching *Maus* in Encounters. I will be sharing my thoughts and notes on that text with faculty members teaching in Encounters since it is an archive of material that enhances interpretation of the graphic novel. Several members of our interdisciplinary reading group already teach units on the graphic novel in their courses; Janis and Chris plan to teach entire courses on the graphic novel for example. We agreed in our final session that we would be open to visit each other's classrooms to team-teach a unit or a text in the future as a way to encourage cross-disciplinary teaching and learning. We have not yet figured out how team-teaching entire courses across the disciplines would work, but we think of our sessions as beginning a conversation on our campus.

Janis did a great job herding us together this summer even when we had scattered to the four winds. She kept us organized and on schedule. We also had productive sessions when we did gather. I see that as a starting point to more conversations about the graphic novel as more of us work on incorporating this material into our courses.