

Cross-Disciplinary Learning and Teaching Initiative
The Art and Architecture of Visual Narration
Summer 2014: Final Report

Workshop participants

Breckenridge, Janis (Coordinator)
Forbes, Daniel
Hurlburt, Sarah
Kiefel, Kynde
Lincoln, Justin
Pietrantonio, Nicole

Workshop description

Graphic novels—hybrid literary and visual texts engaging diverse themes of historical, social and aesthetic import—readily lend themselves to cross-disciplinary study. This workshop, which built upon a 2012 CDLTI on the art of storytelling and the teaching of graphic texts (narrative and pedagogy), focused upon formal qualities and artistic innovations of these hybrid works. We studied wordless texts, non-traditional graphic novel formats/content and comic exhibitions in gallery spaces.

Workshop participants included four faculty members representing three academic departments (Spanish, Foreign Languages and Literatures and Studio Art) together with Daniel Forbes and Kynde Kiefel from the Sheehan Gallery. We examined visual storytelling through the wordless masterpieces of Lynd Ward and Frans Masereel; through diverse deconstructions of the book format with Guillermo López Peña's *Codex Espangliensis*, Pascal Rabaté's *Fenêtres sur rue, matinées, soirées* and Chris Ware's *Building Stories*; through David Mazzucchelli's highly stylized masterwork *Asterios Polyp* and through Dylan Edward's questioning of traditional gender and genre spectrums in *Transposes*. The final session—a roundtable in which each participant shared material regarding critical responses to gallery displays of comic art and/or particular artist exhibits or curated events/shows—focused specifically on gallery exhibitions of comic art and featured a discussion of the many possibilities for the Fall 2015 Sheehan Gallery graphic novel exhibition.

Primary (academic) goals of this faculty workshop included becoming familiar with the rich and varied forms of this hybrid literary/artistic medium, engaging in close analysis of how visual imagery and verbal text interact and examining various ways in which comic art has been displayed in galleries. Perhaps of even greater benefit were the frequent and always rich spontaneous teaching / learning moments—the exchange of pedagogical ideas (classroom activities, lesson plans, how such texts are implemented in the classroom), broader conversations regarding Whitman faculty/students/staff and readership of / artistic and analytic engagement with graphic texts, considerations of faculty involvement with Sheehan Gallery exhibits, discussion of library holdings and classifications of this material, etc. The simple fact of prolonged intellectual engagement with colleagues who share a passion for book art—priceless!

Practical Matters

Participants met for six regular sessions to discuss specific graphic texts (see the syllabus below). For these regular meetings, which lasted at least two hours, each participant had selected the

reading material and took responsibility for leading the conversation. A final seventh session took the form of a collaborative roundtable discussion around gallery exhibitions. This final session lasted three hours. Thus the group met for a total of 15 hours over the course of June and July of 2014.

Scheduling seven meeting times during the summer for those working in academia always poses a challenge. Although I began this process early, I found that I needed to adjust as participants' plans materialized or changed. I would caution anyone coordinating a summer workshop to expect scheduling to be an ongoing responsibility. That said, I am most grateful to the participants' flexibility and good nature as dates and times were occasionally changed as needed.

It is worth noting that we also changed our venue partway through the summer. We initially met at Olive but found the space to be too busy and loud, thus detracting from group exchange. By moving to Fouts we were able to work in quieter spaces complete with large tables for showcasing texts under study. We were also able to host amazing "discovery" sessions in which multiple texts, supplemental to the specific work under consideration, could be displayed. Participants could then move through these works, easily comparing them, viewing them in their diverse and complex layouts, etc. This proved to be quite beneficial and I would strongly urge future coordinators to carefully consider in advance the location for their meetings.

Workshop syllabus

June 17 (Tues) (2:30-4:30): (De)Constructing Foundations

Led by Janis Breckenridge

- *Codex Espangliensis: From Columbus to the Border Patrol* by Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Enrique Chagoya and Felicia Rice

June 19 (Th) (2:30 -3:30): The Art of Wordless Narration

Led by Nicole Pietrantoni

- *Graphic Witness: Four Wordless Graphic Novels* by Frans Masereel, Lynd Ward Giacomo Patri and Laurence Hyde

June 24 (Th) (1:30-3:30): The Architecture of Wordless Narration

Led by Sarah Hurlburt

- Pascal Rabaté's *Fenêtres sur rue, matinées, soirées*

June 26 (Tues) (2:30-4:30): Pushing the Boundaries of Graphic Novel Format

Led by Justin Lincoln

- Chris Ware. *Building Stories*

June 30 (Mon) (1:30-3:30): Crossing the Gender / Genre Spectrum

Led by Daniel Forbes

- Dylan Edwards. *Transposes*.

July 8 (Tues) (1:30-3:30): Stylized Eccentricities

Led by Kynde Kiefel

- David Mazzucchelli. *Asterios Polyp*

July 22 (Tues) (1-4): Nailed to the Walls—Comic Art Museums and Exhibitions

Collaborative Roundtable Discussion

Reflections from Participants

Forbes, Daniel

Among the Sheehan Gallery's primary goals is the creation of exhibitions that support faculty and student interests, and the design of displays that can be incorporated into class curriculum, facilitating a variety of educational approaches. Being able to participate in this summer's CDLTI on graphic novels was a tremendous opportunity to work with a variety of faculty, laying the groundwork for just such an exhibit. I see the CDLTI platform as wonderful tool in the curatorial process and would like to think that this is just the first in a series of gallery staff/faculty interactions leading to future Sheehan Gallery projects/displays.

Janis Breckenridge did an excellent job chairing this CDLTI session, especially given the challenges of coordinating a group over the busy summer months. The diversity of academic/personal interests in the participants around graphic narratives allowed for a wide range of topics to be covered, including issues of identity, gender, history, technology, language, and art. It is my hope that the conversations on these topics, sparked within these meetings, will be further developed in the emerging exhibit.

While each text explored differed greatly from the others, I was struck by the fluid progression of our sessions as every succeeding narrative built in some way on the previous. I was also surprised that in a group largely comprised of individuals generally so very concerned with language, that quite a number of the texts had few, if any words, or that the text was fragmented, and in some cases all but unreadable. This led to engaging discussions focusing more on the formal qualities of the texts, the book as object and architecture, and the importance of non-linear narratives and impact of pictorial signifiers and communications.

Beyond the group's articulations around the form and content of our chosen books, I found it of particular interest to learn how faculty, across disciplines are specifically using graphic narratives as part of their pedagogy. At one point, too, there was a brief discussion of the student body and a break-down of *who* and *how* graphic narratives are engaging Whitman students. This is one conversation I wish we could have devoted a little more time to. Reflecting on this CDLTI as a whole, however, the only disappointment I really have is that it is over: the world of graphic narratives is vast and there is so much to consider. Even so, given what was covered in the course of this summer, I feel confident that the Sheehan Gallery can provide a complex and

engaging graphic narrative exhibit for the fall of 2015 that will appeal to a large number of people on campus and the larger Walla Walla community.

Hurlburt, Sarah

This CDTL on the *The Art and Architecture of Visual Narration* led by Janis Breckenridge was an excellent complement to the 2012 version, titled *The Art of Storytelling and the Teaching of Graphic Texts*. This session was informed by the previous session, and with three members in common was able to revisit a number of questions raised in the previous workshop. At the same time, the focus of this round was quite different. First of all, it was much less text-centric than our previous workshop. Several of the works we examined had little or no text, and the formal focus (architecture) on narrative structures that exist primarily in visual rather than textual form really pushed us to develop and articulate our understanding of how these elements function, and how we can incorporate this level of understanding in our teaching.

Highlights of the sessions for me were curricular discussions – I feel like Janis and Justin and I have had a chance to test out some of the ideas from our previous collaboration, and this was the opportunity to discuss what happened, what went well and what went wrong or simply faded away. The question of outcomes for this group runs straight up against the curricular question – to what degree can we incorporate the material of a new area or approach into the existing curriculum, and what do we hope to accomplish by doing so? Janis is the only one of us who has now taught an entire course with a significant (~50%) portion of graphic narrative on the syllabus. The rest of us are weaving bits and pieces into our regular offerings. We discussed what we are trying to do with these snapshots, how effective it is, and whether the blended approach is good enough or what would be gained by devoting an entire course. I will be teaching one book and some excerpts again in the fall, so this discussion is very relevant to my current course preparation.

One interesting element of discussion was the high art/low art divide, and the fact that while our students are extremely interested in this kind of material, they perceive us (vague Whitman in general, not us personally) as being unsupportive or even opposed. Another element, and one that went completely unresolved, is the economic obstacles to incorporating graphic novels in the curriculum. The books to do a full-semester 4-credit graphic novel course could cost in excess of 300\$ for the students.

The exhibit discussion went hand in hand with the curricular discussion. Both are questions of how and why do we present graphic material to Whitman students (as our first public; in the context of a possible exhibit this discussion expanded the “public” question significantly). However, where the curricular question runs up against the question of how to fit the course into major and minor requirements, the exhibit question runs up against the question of how to allocate and assess the effort involved in a project of that size, which ends up being a service overload without research credit for the faculty involved. Connecting it to things like an O’Donnell proposal and a visiting educator or lecture would significantly strengthen the rationale for this kind of exhibit (and the corresponding faculty effort); at the same time, such elements would best occur supplementing the context of an actual course as opposed to free-floating.

Kiefel, Kynde

The 2014 CDLTI Graphic Novel workshop was my first experience with this particular format. I am a real graphic novel enthusiast and am very grateful to have been included in this insightful and expansive group. The specific texts that each member of the group chose to present were beautifully varied representative of the many possibilities along the graphic narrative continuum. It became clear in previewing the chosen texts ahead of time that we would be analyzing some non-linear pieces that demanded a great deal of engagement. It was a pleasure to spend good amounts of mental energy on these sequential and non-sequential, wordy and wordless, works.

Part of what I saw as the success of these meetings, discussions, and various analyses was a willingness to dissect the relevance and value of even the most challenging text. Though opinions understandably varied amidst the six books, I rarely witnessed a lack of engagement, as members of the group were game enough to share thoughtful and surprising insights. It was helpful to have strong representatives from several disciplines offer up analyses and criticism from very different points of understanding; during these meetings, I felt that the featured book kept growing layers as we unpacked the aspects each person was struck by.

Furthermore, to have discussions with the members of this group on topics such as the necessity for a dedicated graphic novel section in the library, ways in which the graphic novel form can be cultivated within various departments and groups at Whitman College and the larger community, and the various ways in which a text can be translated into presentation and gallery settings was exciting and relevant. In other words, much of what we discussed will materialize in one form or another, which is incredibly exciting!

This CDLTI experience will become part into my daily work life as we prepare for the upcoming Graphic Novel Exhibition in the Sheehan Gallery, slated for Fall 2015. This particular show has been discussed and planned for over the course of a few years now and thanks to Janis's excellent leadership and ability to focus this subject, we are now finally looking at making the Graphic Novel show a vibrant reality. The ideas and materials brought to the table by each group member about what the scope of the exhibition should be, how many artists should be focused on, who should be brought to campus, how the work can be presented to create movement within the space, whether or not the gallery should contain a lounge, and also the big 'Why?' of it all truly helped me articulate in my own mind what the resulting show should look like. Our final meeting also brought into sharper focus the question as to whether or not the graphic novel materials on display need to be contextualized by various other media. While I agree that context and certain proof of legitimacy are useful, I also know that the graphic novel medium stands on it's own in the current art climate, so I no longer see a strong need to "prove" anything. Therefore, I would rather see the graphic novel materials stand on their own in the gallery space.

In addition to my job as Exhibitions & Collections Manager at the Sheehan Gallery and the obvious exhibition connection to the medium in question, this CDLTI has also proven exceptionally useful in my own studio practice. Graphic novels and comics are the medium(s) I most often use to translate my own stories, so to be able to build on our sequential art library, as well as to truly delve in and unpack all the ways each of our texts work (or don't work) was an invaluable learning experience as I continue with my own work. I also serve as an informal advisor to a handful of Whitman students who are interested in these fields, as well as graphic

design practices. For them as well as my Kids College students, I feel better equipped to pass ideas and discussion points that the group has offered.

The manner in which this CDLTI Graphic Novel workshop was conducted seemed to work very successfully. Creating an atmosphere in which a nicely varied group can meet and respectfully analyze creative works and ideas is an opportunity that truly grows the college's reach and strengthens interdisciplinary ties across campus. The six participants in this particular group each offered very relevant and specific perspectives (as well as great reading material) and on the whole, it felt like a cohesive and intelligent group. I was also grateful for our change in venue early on. As lovely as The Olive is, gathering in Fouts helped focus the exchanges and expand the possibility for presentation, so I would recommend a similar venue for future workshops of this kind. Also, I see value in the willingness to include Whitman staff in these groups (and not just because I am a staff member). I believe this mixture of experience between departments, faculty, and staff helps expand the discussion in complex and interesting ways, so I would encourage this practice of inclusion to continue. Overall this was an invaluable and highly enjoyable use of time this summer.

Lincoln, Justin

Several things stand out in particular concerning the success of this particular Cross-Disciplinary Learning and Teaching Initiative. The first is the valuable perspective gained by the presence of the wonderful staff of Sheehan Gallery. Daniel Forbes' and Kynde Keifel's participation not only provided great discussion points in each meeting and individual session leadership on the works of Dylan Edwards and David Mazucchelli, but also led to a fruitful discussion to start planning a gallery exhibition on Graphic Novels. Their eagerness to work with the faculty on this venture is noted and appreciated. The expressed outcome of a gallery show also allowed this particular CDLTI to have a greater focus, beyond the texts discussed. A final successful component was a recurrent thread of discussion concerning our students previous, current and future involvement with graphic novels and pictorial narratives. There is no one over-arching profile of this student involvement. However, it is clear that graphic novels and pictorial narratives are modes of expression that fruitfully tap into students' imaginative and critical faculties in ways that other materials cannot replicate.

Graphic novels have been and will continue to be a component in my pedagogical toolbox. I have previously used Scott McCloud's text *Understanding Comics* to help outline the expressive qualities of line to students in foundational art classes. Even with the recent re-structuring of the art department's foundational classes I plan on continuing to include that material. This workshop has also prompted me to think about how I can also use graphic narratives as a point of interest in discussions and projects centered on basic questions of how we can present visual and textual information. Complex ideas concerning linearity vs. non-linearity and methods of sequencing can often be made wonderfully explicit in graphic narratives. They can then also be applied to cinema, novels, PowerPoint presentations and even computer programs. I look forward to utilizing the upcoming Sheehan exhibition to explore these issues in space as well as time.

I think the biggest concern about the structure and design of the course was addressed by changing our location to Fouts. While all of the sessions were informative, they became more

comfortable and productive when we had more more flexible spaces in which to handle the materials. While scheduling during the summer was not always easy, the flexibility of the group as a whole, and the great leadership of Janis Breckenridge helped make a fun, cohesive, and educationally rich experience.

Pietrantonio, Nicole

a) While much of my work as a printmaker and book artist involves looking at a diverse sampling of visual culture, this CDLTI introduced me to many new resources and texts to introduce to my students. From Chris Ware's *Building Stories* to *Codex Espanglienses*, this workshop provided a forum for deep inquiry into the form and content of graphic novels. Each participating faculty member contributed exciting texts, facilitated discussion, and introduced us to how he or she might teach their selected graphic novel. As an artist, I focused primarily on the visual layout and design, so it was a great learning experience to see how my colleagues analyzed the texts through their areas of expertise. I especially valued senior colleagues' ideas about lesson plans and teaching methods for introducing these works in the classroom.

b) Our workshop will culminate in an exhibition at the Sheehan Gallery in the fall of 2015. This exhibition will feature many of the graphic novels that members of our group studied this past summer. The Sheehan Gallery graphic novel exhibition will meet a need that is currently not being met in our studio art curriculum – to highlight the art of the graphic novel, an area that many students are extremely excited about but that our department currently does not offer. Our campus gallery has been and will continue to be an indispensable part of my teaching (especially given Whitman's rural location) and I will definitely integrate lesson plans and visits to this exhibit into my curriculum.

c) Throughout the summer we cultivated a collegial and supportive environment where junior and senior faculty voices participated equally. We listened to one another and established a space where individuals felt comfortable asking questions and sharing ideas. To me, these are incredibly important, but often overlooked, dynamics in faculty interactions. I believe much of our workshop's success was due to the warm and welcoming learning environment we created.