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The Potential Role of Comics in Teaching Qualitative Research Methods

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Abstract

This article argues that comics have a potentially positive role to play in supporting the teaching of qualitative research methods in higher education. It tells the story of the creation and use of a short pedagogical comic. We begin with a brief review of the literature around the use of comics in teaching. Then we offer two first-person accounts. Independent researcher Helen Kara narrates her creation of *Conversation with a Purpose*, designed as a resource to support the teaching of qualitative interviewing. It contains the story of a student's first real-world interview, with some deliberately ambiguous aspects, and some discussion questions. Then Jenni Brooks, a senior lecturer in sociology at Sheffield Hallam University, outlines her use of the comic in teaching undergraduate sociology students. Each author offers a brief reflection on her experience. We conclude that the use of comics has the potential to bridge the gap between classroom and practice for inexperienced qualitative researchers, and we encourage further research in this area.

Keywords

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The Potential Role of Comics in Teaching Qualitative Research Methods

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This article argues that comics have a potentially positive role to play in supporting the teaching of qualitative research methods in higher education. It tells the story of the creation and use of a short pedagogical comic. We begin with a brief review of the literature around the use of comics in teaching. Then we offer two first-person accounts. Independent researcher Helen Kara narrates her creation of Conversation with a Purpose, designed as a resource to support the teaching of qualitative interviewing. It contains the story of a student's first real-world interview, with some deliberately ambiguous aspects, and some discussion questions. Then Jenni Brooks, a senior lecturer in sociology at Sheffield Hallam University, outlines her use of the comic in teaching undergraduate sociology students. Each author offers a brief reflection on her experience. We conclude that the use of comics has the potential to bridge the gap between classroom and practice for inexperienced qualitative researchers, and we encourage further research in this area. Keywords: Comics, Teaching, Pedagogy, Research Methods, Qualitative Interviewing, Qualitative Research

A comic is a document made up of "pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud, 1993, p. 9). There are very few comics or comic textbooks on the subject of research methods. Those that exist which we know of are discussed later in this article. Yet research shows that comics offer a "whole-brain activity" facilitating "dual coding," that is, the use of both brain hemispheres at once, and so enabling both visual and verbal learning (Aleixo & Sumner, 2017, p. 80; Blanch & Mulvihill, 2013, p. 39). Research has demonstrated that the use of pictures to support text aids retention of information (Aleixo & Sumner, 2017, p. 79; Caldwell, 2012, p. 6; Duncan, Taylor, & Stoddard, 2016, p. 44). Also, research within a professional setting shows that the use of comics, to inform adults, aids comprehension (Botes, 2017, p. 1).

We argue that there is a place for comics in the teaching of research methods in higher education. Teaching research methods to university students is a challenging and important task, yet it is often of low status in university contexts (Nind & Lewthwaite, 2018a, p. 399). In this article we demonstrate some ways in which a comic can help with the teaching of research methods. We do this by presenting the story of the creation and use of a research-inspired pedagogical comic. We offer a review of relevant literature, and a discussion of the development and implementation of the comic in the light of that literature. We include our reflections on the process and aftermath of creating and using the comic and share our conclusions.

Literature Review

Comics are used to support teaching at various educational stages in a range of disciplines. This has been the case for several decades (Humphrey, 2014, p. 78). For example, comics were used in the United States to teach English language and literature in elementary and secondary schools in the 1940s and 1950s (Tilley, 2013, pp. 12-15, Jones, 2015, pp. 336-338). Most of the literature focuses on the United States, but comics have also been used in education in other countries around the world such as France, Mexico and Japan (Duncan, Taylor, & Stoddard, 2016, p. 41). Educational comics are now a recognised comics genre (Duncan, Smith, & Levitz, 2015, p. 184). However, comics in education today mostly focus on literacy and foreign language learning for schoolchildren. This may be in part because of the stigma that still exists around reading and using comics in adulthood (Blanch & Mulvihill, 2013, p. 37; McCloud, 1993, p. 3).

Nevertheless, thanks to the groundwork laid by pioneers such as Larry Gonick and Leonard Rifas in the United States in the 1970s (Duncan et al., 2016, p. 37), comics have made small inroads into higher education. For example, comic books are being used in higher education to teach subjects like science, history, and philosophy (Duncan et al., 2016, p. 42) and, of course, the study of comics themselves through the seminal work of Scott McCloud (Humphrey, 2014, p. 77). Also, comics are predominantly used in education as resource materials rather than textbooks (Aleixo & Norris, 2010, p. 72; Mallia, 2007, p. 10). It is true that comic strips are regularly found as a pedagogical feature in textbooks (Bolton-Gary, 2012, p. 389), yet there is little use of comics themselves as textbooks, that is, textbooks in comic form (Aleixo & Norris, 2010, p. 73). There are, of course, exceptions. For example, there are three comic textbooks for business studies and one for new university students in the US (Short et al., 2013, pp. 201-217), one for psychology in the UK (Aleixo & Norris, 2010, p. 72), and two on ethnographic research methods (Galman, 2013, 2019). Probably there are others too, and this could be seen as part of the wider movement towards including more creative approaches in research (Kara, 2020, in press). However, textbooks in comic form are still very rare indeed.

There is a paucity of research on the use of comics for teaching in higher education (Aleixo & Sumner, 2017, p. 80; Blanch & Mulvihill, 2013, p. 35; Caldwell, 2012, p. 6). What does exist demonstrates that comics are useful pedagogical tools which engage and help to motivate students (Blanch & Mulvihill, 2013, p. 38; Hosler & Boomer, 2011, p. 309). Despite the lack of empirical evidence to support their use, comics are increasingly being used in higher education for both teaching and research (Farthing & Priego, 2016, p. 1; Humphrey, 2014, p. 73). However, to the best of the authors' knowledge, before the production and dissemination in 2018 of the comic *Conversation with a Purpose* about qualitative interviewing, comics had not been used in the teaching *of* research.

Within research, comics are used in a variety of ways. For example, comic templates are used in data collection (e.g., Wall, 2017) and comics are used to disseminate findings (e.g., Dahl et al., 2012; Priego, 2016). Weaver-Hightower argues that comics can be used at all stages of the qualitative research process (2013, p. 265), but even he does not consider their potential for teaching qualitative research methods. Mainstream education research methods texts, such as the magisterial *Research Methods in Education* (Cohen et al., 2018) which is now in its eighth edition and runs to over 900 pages, generally does not mention comics.

Teaching university students to do research is important in many disciplines (Wulf-Andersen et al., 2013, p. 13). Yet the teaching of research methods is a challenge for a number of reasons (Nind & Lewthwaite 2018b, p. 78). First, there is a global scarcity of resources and organised support for teachers of research methods (Earley, 2007, p. 1), though this situation has improved recently in the UK through the work of the National Centre for Research Methods

(Lewthwaite & Nind, 2016, p. 415). Second, and perhaps allied, there is no field of "research education" as there is for education in other disciplines such as nursing and science (Earley, 2007, p. 1). Third, research methods is a complex topic, and its teachers must try to take into account the vast number of possible contexts for research, though it is impossible to cover them all (Earley, 2007, p. 2). Yet, fourth, there are no agreed curricula, nationally or internationally, for this huge and dynamic subject area (Lewthwaite & Nind, 2016, p. 413). Fifth, and most relevant for this article, regardless of how skilled and thorough a research methods teacher might be, there is a huge gulf between the classroom and practice (Earley, 2007, p. 4). Finding ways to bridge this gulf is a major challenge for research methods pedagogy and, in our view, this is one place where comics have a key role to play.

Evidence suggests comics can aid memory and retention of information (Aleixo & Sumner, 2017; Hosler & Boomer, 2011; Mallia, 2007), but research methods education is not really about memorising facts. There is little discussion about learning objectives in the literature (Earley, 2014), but one review identified three broad goals for research methods education in general: (1) to make the process of research visible; (2) to facilitate learning through the experience of doing research; and (3) to encourage critical reflection on the research process (Kilburn, Nind, & Wiles, 2014). This reflects Hammersley's conjecture that

> the task of teaching research methods… is not the transmission of a body of knowledge, or the drilling of students in the use of techniques, but rather a matter of helping them to build up relevant knowledge and capabilities, and to develop the necessary intellectual virtues. (2012, p. 2)

We propose that the use of comics can facilitate these goals.

In the next two sections of this article, the authors will give first-person accounts of their experiences in creating and using *Conversation with a Purpose*. The comic was created by Helen Kara, an independent researcher from the UK, who made it freely available for educational use. One of the people who used it in the classroom is Jenni Brooks, a senior lecturer in sociology who used the comic in teaching sessions with first year undergraduate students.

Following these first-person accounts, we will each offer a brief reflection on the experience. Then we will discuss some of the implications of our work and thoughts for research methods teaching and learning more widely.

The Inspiration for, and Creation of, *Conversation with a Purpose* - Helen Kara

In July 2016 I attended the pedagogy session at the Research Methods Festival, an international conference at the University of Bath in England. Among other things, my notes from that session say, "Huge gap between when you learn something and when you have to put it into practice." That chimed with my own experience, both as an undergraduate doing a research degree in psychology in the early 1980s, and as a postgraduate doing a Master's degree in social research methods in the early 2000s.

I am a lifelong reader of comics and had been collaborating on *Degrees of Success: A Novel Writing Guide*, a comic textbook about academic writing intended for undergraduate students and scheduled for publication in 2020. It immediately occurred to me that comics could help to bridge the gap in research methods pedagogy, and I resolved to try to find a way to put this to the test. There were some hurdles to overcome though, not least that I cannot draw. So I needed to find a collaborator. Then I have a very limited budget, so it could not be anyone expensive. I spoke first to a colleague and friend who I knew had produced a comic on student finance and debt with students at Staffordshire University (Priego, 2016). That is one

of the universities closest to where I live and work, and it offers a rare BA in Cartoon and Comic Arts. My colleague/friend put me in touch with the Senior Lecturer who oversees that BA and he agreed to help.

In October 2017 I went to speak to the Senior Lecturer's third-year undergraduate students. I gave a presentation covering some of the practicalities of self-employment and working with clients. I also gave them a brief for the illustration of a 12-page comic about qualitative interviewing. The brief included pen pictures of the three characters and a synopsis of the story, asked respondents to draw each character and two settings, and gave details of remuneration, deadlines, and assignment of intellectual property. I chose to feature qualitative interviewing because it is one of the most commonly taught and used research methods and I thought it would lend itself well to a short narrative. I had written a story which took the main character, Owen, from his research methods classroom, out into the community to conduct his first interview, and back to the classroom. The interview was a complex and imperfect encounter which I thought had scope to be pedagogically useful for novice interviewers.

I have had some short stories published and have a reasonable grasp of narrative requirements. It mattered to me, not only to create a story that would be pedagogically useful, but also to do my best to write one that was a compelling read. I chose a potentially emotive interview topic, experience of ageing, to make the story more interesting. Then I tried to build in some issues that novice interviewers might face but which would not necessarily be obvious from the classroom, such as: feelings of uncertainty and nervousness; the balance of power when you're working with someone in their own home and who is from a different age group; the extent to which we can believe what interviewees tell us; the emotional impact of an encounter with someone whose life experience is very different from our own; and ethical dilemmas around the issue of building rapport versus creating friendships with participants (Kara, 2018, p. 102). I also aimed to leave space for readers to form their own impressions, rather than trying to nail everything down.

I received some submissions and, in consultation with the Senior Lecturer, chose to commission Sophie Jackson to illustrate the comic. Sophie turned out to be an ace collaborator. She kept in touch, met our agreed deadlines, and produced terrific work. Also, she valued my feedback, and I hers: she made some very helpful interventions in the storyline and was willing to use my ideas about the artwork. Best of all, from my point of view, she loved my characters and their story.

I wrote discussion questions to go inside the back cover which Sophie approved. The comic and the covers were finished in May 2018. It is in full colour and its title is *Conversation with a Purpose*. Sophie produced a PDF version which I made [freely available for download from my website](#) together with a link to instructions which show how to print the comic so that it can be turned into a booklet with a single fold.

I paid for 250 copies to be printed, gave 20 to Sophie and took as many as I could carry to the Research Methods Festival in 2018. I was not giving a presentation, but I asked the organisers of the pedagogy session if I could have five minutes to present the comic and they kindly agreed. The comic was warmly received by around 40 research methods professionals.

Over the next few months, I gave copies to colleagues who I thought would appreciate and perhaps use them. One such colleague was Jenni Brooks, who I met with for lunch on a sunny day in the Peak District in July 2018 to discuss writing and research. She was gratifyingly enthusiastic, though neither of us knew then that we would be writing about this together the following year.

The Use of *Conversation with a Purpose* in Teaching Qualitative Interviewing to Undergraduate Students - Jenni Brooks

I teach qualitative research methods to first year undergraduate sociology students. There is a mix of experience and ability across the cohort. Some students have completed small research projects in high school, whereas others have not encountered research methods as a topic at all, and the vast majority have no experience of interviewing. Helen and I agreed that I would try using *Conversation with a Purpose* to introduce students to qualitative interviewing.

The research methods module ("Researching Society") is compulsory for all first-year undergraduate students (there are further advanced modules in the second and third years). The module is split in two, with qualitative methods being taught in one semester and quantitative in the other. In the autumn semester of the 2018/19 academic year there were a total of 64 first-year students spread across four seminar groups (14-18 students per group).

Students have a single class each week and are expected to spend a further three hours each week studying for the module, with guidance given about what they should be reading. The qualitative part of the module covers an introduction to the philosophical underpinnings of research; doing research ethically; qualitative interviewing (including analysis of interview data); semiotic analysis of newspaper articles; reviewing academic literature; and writing academic reports. For their assessment, students are required to analyse several newspaper articles about a news story of their choice and complete a short qualitative interview with someone of their choosing who they already know.

I introduced the *Conversation with a Purpose* comic in a session covering practice interviews. The session the week before had been a general introduction to qualitative interviewing, and my aims for the practice interview session were that students would:

1. Understand and be prepared for the issues they may face when doing qualitative interviews
2. Have generated a list of questions to use as a topic guide

3. Have practiced carrying out an interview, observed others doing so, and discussed feedback.

Normally I take all four classes in the year group myself, but this particular week I was away for the first class and a colleague covered for me and made notes about the session. All four classes looked at *Conversation with a Purpose* at the start of the session. I had saved an electronic version on the module's virtual learning environment site and printed a copy for each student. We asked the students to work in small groups of three or four and gave around 15 minutes to read the comic. There are discussion questions listed at the back of the comic which cover how Owen handled the interview, whether he should have admitted he was nervous or showed his feelings, whether his interviewee was telling the truth (and whether it mattered), and the nature of his relationship with his interviewee.

We asked the students to talk through the discussion questions in their small groups, then each group fed back to the whole class, prompting a wider class discussion. This is a common seminar format for this cohort, so they were familiar with the structure. The conversations prompted by the comic in both the smaller groups and the wider class discussion were broad and covered both practical and methodological issues.

In the comic, Owen is one of a class of students (we are not told their age) sent to interview members of the local residents' association about their experiences of loneliness. Owen is nervous when he first meets Ella, the woman he has been assigned to interview. Ella tries to put Owen at his ease by offering him a drink and a piece of cake and invites him to admit his nervousness, which he does. This provided us with our first discussion point, prompted by one of the questions at the back of the comic: "Owen admitted to Ella that he was nervous. Should he have done this? Why?"

Very often in qualitative research the power lies with the researcher/interviewer – the person asking the questions. However, Owen is young and inexperienced. Ella is in her own home with far more life experience, and we see her making Owen feel more comfortable. Owen tries to deny he is nervous, and we see an older woman (his grandmother?) appearing in a thought bubble admonishing him for lying, and so he admits his nervousness.

The students across all four classes were fairly evenly split between those who felt Owen was right to admit his nervousness and those who felt he should be more "professional" – a term introduced by the students themselves. This allowed us to have a conversation about interviewing styles, power balances, and the different schools of thought in relation to "professionalism."

Owen asks Ella how long she has lived in her current home and wonders how he will know whether she is telling the truth. Ella tells Owen that she is lonely and that her family rarely visit. Prompted by one of the questions in the comic about whether Ella was telling the truth and whether this mattered, this led us to a discussion of how it is Ella's perception that is relevant here rather than the actual frequency of their visits.

We discussed the effect of Ella getting upset on Owen and talked about the harm that could be caused to both parties by emotional experiences in qualitative interviews. Interestingly, none of the groups of students seemed to remember Owen's bereavement after the death of his own grandmother or seemed to connect this to the subject matter – but it did allow us to discuss the potential negative effects of interviewing on both the interviewer and interviewee.

Owen tells Ella she does not have to answer his questions, and she responds that she does "or you won't have an interview, will you?", prompting a discussion of how interviewees may feel they need to please interviewers. Towards the end of the comic we see Ella feeding cake to the pigeons on her balcony and asking Owen if he will visit her again. Owen's teacher

tells the class not to let interviewees mistake rapport for friendship, and to keep relationships professional, but Owen thinks about how lonely Ella sounds and takes her some flowers.

The final discussion question asks "Should Owen have visited Ella a second time or not? Why?" We discussed the implications of developing an ongoing relationship with research participants, and again linked this to different paradigms within qualitative research in relation to whether this would be considered either essential or inappropriate. This is discussed further below.

There is plenty more we could have talked about here: broader discussions around research ethics, practical issues around preparing for interviews and deciding what questions to ask, and alternatives to interviewing. Next year I plan to devote a whole 90-minute session to discussing qualitative interviewing using the comic.

Reflections

Helen

For me, *Conversation with a Purpose* was a proof of concept. I believed, with no specific evidence, that comics could help with the teaching of research methods. In order to find out whether my belief had any basis, I needed to create and disseminate an educational comic. That wasn't easy, but it was a very interesting process.

I have had positive feedback from people around the world, some of whom have used the comic in ways I didn't anticipate. For example, Susie Weller from the University of Southampton used the comic with STEM academics at all levels from early career researchers to established professors. She said:

> I used *Conversation with a Purpose* in a training course aimed at building capacity in qualitative research amongst biomedical scientists. It encouraged participants to question assumptions, explore objectivity and subjectivity, consider the nature of research relationships in qualitative work, as well as identify potential ethical dilemmas. (Weller, 2019, personal communication)

I have had no negative feedback. Of course, people who think comics are pedagogically ineffective are unlikely to use them in the classroom. Also, anyone who does use my comic and finds it ineffective may not tell me. And clearly this account is not a report of an empirical study. Nevertheless, I find it encouraging that teachers and students have had positive learning experiences from my comic.

Jenni

Using *Conversation with a Purpose* with a cohort of undergraduate sociology students facilitated introduction to abstract concepts in an accessible way. I used the comic in a session about the practicalities of qualitative interviewing, but it actually enabled wider conversations around research paradigms – a valuable bridge between theory and reality. I therefore intend to use it earlier in the semester in future years so we can continue to refer back to the story as the students develop their knowledge and understanding of research methods.

The ambiguity built into the comic, and the writing of this article, has allowed me to reflect on my own assumptions around research methods education. In the comic, the topic of Owen's interview is "experiences of ageing" – a topic I would be reluctant to assign to first year undergraduates because of my perceptions of their inability to deal with interviewees being upset. I used this example to discuss which topics might be appropriate for my own

students' research projects, asking them to avoid anything which had the potential to cause distress to their interviewees. This partly stems from my desire to do no harm (to either students or research participants), but also perhaps from my own experiences of research in the fields of social care, caring and dementia, where conversations about ageing and the future can become distressing quite quickly.

Discussion

Research methods educators face several challenges. Students can feel research methods are dull and abstract (Earley, 2014), learning research methods is difficult (Howard & Brady, 2015), and methods can provoke anxiety for students (Nind & Lewthwaite, 2018b). It is difficult to teach research methods in the abstract, and small-scale research projects are common; however, the focus often ends up on the topic of the research, rather than on methods themselves (Hammersley, 2012). In addition, some students are uninterested in research methods as a subject, seeing it as a hoop they have to jump through to get a qualification rather than something intrinsically worth learning to understand. This means that teachers of research methods can face an uphill struggle.

Thus, one of the major challenges in teaching research methods is bridging the gap between the classroom and practice (Earley, 2007, p. 4). Comics have been used to bridge this gap in other contexts, for example helping medical students understand people's experiences of illness (Farthing & Priego, 2016). We argue that comics have considerable potential for use in this way to bridge the gap between theory and reality in teaching research methods. Comics can be a scaffold on which students can build new experiences (Vygotsky, 1978) without having to go out into the field before they are prepared.

There are of course also limitations to the use of comics, as there are with any teaching tool. Students with visual impairment or those who dislike reading comics are unlikely to find them helpful. Even when a comic is freely available for download, colour printing is expensive at best and may be inaccessible. Use of the digital version requires access to appropriate technological equipment. And the continuing stigma around comics (Blanch & Mulvihill, 2013, p. 37; McCloud, 1993, p. 3), stemming in part from their association with children's fiction, means they may not be taken seriously as a teaching aid.

Most people think of textbooks and other educational materials as factual, but fictional materials are used to teach in many subjects (Marsh et al., 2012, p. 449). These materials may include novels, films, short stories, case studies, and comics, among others (Marsh et al., 2003, p. 519). *Conversation with a Purpose* is a fictional comic – a story – and we all learn from stories (Guillet de Monthoux & Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994, p. 9). Research has shown that fiction has considerable potential as a teaching aid, though it is not guaranteed to help (Marsh et al., 2012, pp. 450-451) and it is hard to predict any changes in understanding or behaviour that may result (Jarvis, 2012, p. 744). Indeed, the use of fiction in teaching carries the risk that students will misunderstand the levels of accuracy of the content (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 119; Marsh et al., 2012, p. 451). Another risk is that fictional materials used in educational settings can lead to misinformation (Marsh et al., 2003, p. 534). However, fiction does enable readers to share others' experiences (Jarvis, 2012, p. 750) which makes it ideal to support the teaching of a practical interpersonal skill such as qualitative interviewing.

Some aspects of the story are deliberately ambiguous. For example, after Owen agrees to accept a drink and a piece of cake from Ella, she goes off to the kitchen to fetch them and Owen is left alone. One panel in the comic shows Owen sitting in Ella's living room, physically tense and looking anxious or worried, but with no speech or thought bubble to inform the reader about his state of mind. The ending of the comic is also ambiguous, with Owen taking an action he had been told not to take; this leaves room for a range of judgements about the implications.

In other words, these are "the purposeful elisions in the construction of the text that create spaces for ambiguity of meaning" (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 109).

Jenni's experience of using *Conversation with a Purpose* in the classroom suggests that this kind of ambiguity can be particularly useful for prompting discussion. Fiction is often used in teaching to promote reflection and dialogue (Jarvis, 2012, p. 750). Jenni's use of *Conversation with a Purpose* enabled her students to have thoughtful debates about both practicalities and wider epistemological and ethical issues. For example, some students in all four classes felt Owen should not have returned to visit Ella after the interview, or even engaged in a more general conversation at the start, as this would create bias in the interview and analysis. As most of the students had little prior experience in qualitative interviewing, they were perhaps demonstrating more familiarity with positivist research. This led to a discussion of the approaches taken by some feminist researchers around developing relationships with participants (see Oakley, 2016), and of Indigenous research paradigms, where the concept of aftercare for both individual participants and communities is more fully developed (see Kara, 2018, for further discussion of this). In this case, using fiction to expose students to contested concepts around professionalism, power relations and ethics facilitated the development of research conversations that Howard and Brady (2015) consider an essential part of research methods education. Comics have been used in education for many years and have been demonstrated to be effective in aiding memory and retention of information. While there is no set research methods curriculum, there is some degree of consensus that it is not about rote learning of facts, but about becoming competent either in doing research, or in understanding (and thus being able to evaluate) research.

We argue that comics can play a valuable role in research methods education by helping to bridge the gap between classroom and practice for inexperienced researchers. Comics provide a narrative structure and context for complex discussions of methodological issues that may otherwise seem abstract. This is particularly valuable when students have little prior experience of interviewing and may have little idea of what an interview involves.

Our view is that the potential of comics to support the teaching of qualitative research methods is not limited to interviewing. We believe that comics could be useful in supporting the teaching of many techniques for gathering and analysing data, such as focus groups and thematic analysis, as well as other aspects of research. And we are not alone. While this article was undergoing peer review, a comic about Indigenous/non-indigenous research partnerships was published and is also freely available for download.

We hope our narrative account will inspire those with sufficient resources to undertake empirical research in this nascent field of inquiry, to assess the actual value of comics as pedagogical tools in the teaching of research methods.

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