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## *The truthful messenger: visual methods and representation in qualitative research in education*

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**ABSTRACT** The problems of representation in qualitative research have been widely documented and multiple means of addressing them have been offered. The purpose of this article is to illustrate ways in which employing collaborative visual methods may present one way to address such problems. While this approach is not without complications, a recent pilot study application suggests that the complexity of participant data is well-handled by integrating the graphic novel as a collaborative visual text in data collection, analysis and presentation.

**KEYWORDS:** *visual methods, arts and research, participant representation*

### *Introduction: the truthful messenger*

'I try to be a truthful artist and I try to show a level of courage. I enjoy that. I'm a messenger.' – Jeff Koons

Visual artist Jeff Koons suggests that to be a 'truthful' artist working in the 'arena of representation' one must be both an artist as well as a 'messenger' (Ottman, 1988). In working with rich, descriptive data sets, qualitative researchers must also be both 'artists' and 'messengers.' As artists, researchers develop the contours of their craft, creatively designing and implementing inquiry models and framing their own interpretive 'story'; as messengers, researchers simultaneously audit their subjectivity and attend to participant stories and experiences. The purpose of this article is to illustrate ways in which qualitative researchers may work as both artists and messengers in 'arenas of representation' by employing collaborative visual methods. The discussion that follows includes: 1) a brief introduction to representational issues in qualitative research; 2) an overview of visual methods and their application vis-à-vis representation, including the graphic novel as a visual method; and 3) the pilot application of the graphic novel as visual method in a study of pre-service teachers' stories and identity development. Discussion is concluded with reflections on method and on the problematic nature of discourses of 'truthfulness' in conversations about research.

## *Representational issues in qualitative research*

Marcus and Fischer (1986) write that 'at the broadest level, the contemporary debate is about how an emergent postmodern world is to be represented as an object for social thought in its various contemporary disciplinary manifestations' (p. vii). A long-standing issue in qualitative studies in education is the question of how to best represent research participants and their experiences in the write-ups and presentations of study findings as well as in other stages of the inquiry process. Ultimately, as Nespor and Barylske (1991) write, knowledge is not a substance mined from the experiences of others but rather a co-constructed social text, the representation of which is 'not just a matter of epistemology or method, but a matter of power' (p. 806). While multiple solutions have been offered toward addressing and transforming the power imbalance implicit in representing/being represented, the theme of replacing one voice with many prevails. Frameworks for culturally-sensitive qualitative research, feminist and critical methodologies and researcher-practitioner cooperation alike advocate encouraging this multiplicity via reciprocity, collaboration, shared reflection and interpretive acknowledgement of how phenomena are situated within the context of specific groups' cultural norms and knowledge (Fine, 1994; Lather and Smithies, 1997; Tillman, 2002; Wagner, 1997).

## *Visual methods*

Visual methods can present ways to address representational concerns in qualitative research by balancing the dual researcher roles as artist and messenger – often presenting multiple voices and ideologies instead of an authorial/researcher monologue.

Photographers and filmmakers have worked to create images that represent the experience of participants, but these methods are not free from the dilemmas of representation found elsewhere. Invariably, someone must be behind the camera in either instance, and produce the image itself. Some ethnographic filmmakers and photographers, faced with re-evaluating the dominance of form as functionally synonymous with the dominance of the 'maker's voice', have turned to collaborative film and image-making, where 'dialogic ethnography' may empower the subject (Ruby, 1995: 80).

The vast majority of work in visual anthropology is related primarily to photographic and film images, which leaves the other visual arts somewhat out of the discussion, excepting references to the study of existing art as social commentary or documentary (Banks, 1998; Berman, 1999; Lewinson, 2003; Warburton, 1998). While some researchers in education have used children's drawing processes as curricular aids (Wetton and McWhirter, 1998) these have been instructional explorations rather than research strategies. Work in using images to facilitate communication with children has shown that images can be both elicitation devices and mechanisms for empowering young

children in conversations with adults, as well as artifacts for analysis (Clark, 2004). Again, image-based texts have been shown to be effective in many contexts, but their application in research remains somewhat untried.

In grappling with representational issues in ethnographic filmmaking, Ruby (1995) suggests that one way out of the quandary is to 'abandon the historical tradition of field work in exotic places for the yard work of [one's] own land' and focus on learning to write about what you know best. Ruby cites cartoonist Harvey Pekar's work as an example of the compelling combination of the personal and theoretical, suggesting that the cartoonist is a cultural worker who explores self and culture in ways 'remarkably parallel to ethnography' (p. 81). While I would not suggest, nor does Ruby endorse, a wholesale retreat to our own 'yards', there is much to be learned about representation from the 'yard work' of other 'cultural workers'.

### *The graphic novel*

The cartoonist is a visual artist who works with multi-media, or pen-and-ink, or otherwise constructed images to tell a story. These stories typically appear in comic strips, comic books or graphic novels. The graphic novel in particular can be a unique, highly flexible tool for the examination, understanding and representation of cultural phenomena, including participant data in educational research.

#### OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF THE GENRE

The graphic novel is a distinct subgenre of what are commonly referred to as 'comic books.' However, it differs from the larger 'comic' genre in its flexibility to present a wider range of subject matter than can the 'Sunday funnies' that are often mistakenly seen as representative of the entire genre. The genre itself is young and as a result its boundaries are not well-defined. As Nick Hornby (2002) suggests, it 'presents its artists with problems of appropriateness that the more established arts don't have.' Formal definition of the genre has been dealt with in generalizations: there are usually a sequence of panels wherein images are presented contiguous with text (Christiansen and Magnussen, 2000; McCloud, 1992). Comics do not belong to the 'fine arts' and as such interest in aesthetic commentary and standards has been sparse (Christiansen and Magnussen, 2000). Similarly, the absence of theoretical framing and the establishment of acknowledged schools of style have been related to lack of interest and attention rather than lack of possibility. In other words, the genre is still in the definitional stages; but one benefit may be that relatively unformed boundaries offer flexibility and freedom often not attainable in other more formally defined text genres. While many scholars suggest that this can lead toward opportunism and low standards of aesthetic quality (LeFevre, 2000; Magnussen and Christiansen, 2000) I posit instead that this flexibility is an asset, making the genre more useful for the researcher.

The distinction between 'comics' as the larger genre and the 'graphic novel' as a sub-genre is distinguished by differences in format, style and content. The most important of these differences is that where the comic book typically features the 'muscle heroism of superheroes,' spectacular scenes, sound effects and exaggerated action, the graphic novel address themes such as politics, daily life and autobiography in creative, often sober composition and style (LeFevre, 2000: 101). While the differences in style may be subtle the graphic novel is better suited for telling human stories of experience and identity while comic books are more applicable to super-human tales of mythic proportion.

#### A UNIQUE LENS FOR EXAMINING CULTURE AND MULTIPLE NARRATIVES

Comics have been interpreted as representative of everything from remedial texts to children's pastimes to unconscious representations of dominant ideologies. In recent years academic and popular opinion has shifted toward acceptance of the comic genre as a productive cultural lens and more legitimate text. One of the catalysts for a shift in opinion about comics was the advent of Art Spiegelman's 1986 and 1987 graphic novel series, *MAUS*. With its publication, the graphic novel advanced to a distinct subgenre separate from mainstream comics. Spiegelman's handling of the Holocaust narrative(s) emphasized the appropriateness of the text genre for capturing the multiplicity of voices and the historically and socially situated nature of stories. The single-dimensional clarity of traditional prose-only text may be inadequate for this task: the graphic novel's contiguous images and words, variable multi-form style and capacity for representing multiple perspectives made accessible key aspects of stories that might not have been palpable otherwise. Graphic representations, then, can make use of systems of symbols, texts and images that allow multiple – even contradictory – interpretations to occur simultaneously.

#### STATUS AS A LEGITIMATE ACADEMIC TEXT

While artists who work in comics or graphic novels are now experiencing more recognition as skilled artists and storytellers than they have in the past, the academic establishment has yet to fully recognize the genre as a legitimate format for academic and political discourse. The genre challenges not only the elite art and academic establishments by contesting the defining parameters of art and discourse, but also the boundaries of what constitutes a meaningful text. As exemplified by the popular success of works delving into weightier human themes, the graphic novel has proven itself a robust text genre capable of faithfully representing a wide variety of material (Brabner and Pekar, 1994; Eldon, 1997; Sacco and Said, 2002; Satrapi, 2003, 2004; Spiegelman, 1986, 1987, 2004).

This does not mean that the genre is not still in search of academic legitimation. Rather, the academic prejudice against comic art is still present regardless of recent advances and is based in part on the cultural association of comics with literature designed for children or others who require images as

a guide for reading comprehension (Groensteen, 2000). While general acceptance has legitimated the graphic novel in the realm of popular literature, it is important to understand that this does not necessarily translate to academic legitimacy. Indeed, as Fischman (2001) writes, the educational research community 'has tended to avoid the examination of visual culture and the necessary debates about the epistemological value of images in educational research' because, in part, images and visual culture are not 'accepted forms of scholarly transmission' (p. 28). Fischman goes on to suggest that this 'blind spot' in educational research suggests that resistance to images is part of the 'deep grammar' of the discipline, and one that keeps researchers from accessing a new way to problematize the work of inquiry while also advancing understanding across the field.

### *The pilot study application of the graphic novel as visual method*

The pilot application of the graphic novel-as-method occurred as part of an ethnographic study of pre-service teachers and identity development. Study data varied widely, but analysis relied heavily upon the stories participants told me about their experiences in teacher preparation. My attempt to address issues of representation in telling these stories involved creating a collaborative graphic novel text with participants. This approach was not without victories – or challenges – but remains an area of active exploration in my research with pre-service teachers. While graphic novels appear in the educational research literature, those appearances are restricted to their use in literacy instruction at the K-12 level (Norton, 2003; Schwarz, 2002a, 2002b). These studies typically do not distinguish between graphic novels and 'comic books' and focus on reading rather than creating the texts. Exceptions focused on students creating their own comic books as a concluding comprehension exercise focused on developing content area skills at the secondary and university levels (Chilcoat, 1993; Hall and Lucal, 1999; Morrison et al., 2002) and in essentially unrelated research around the use of comic books as therapeutic tools in the mental health arena (Mulholland, 2004).

#### STUDY, CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS

A larger body of ethnographic data collected during the 2002–2003 academic year informs this analysis. This study involved an examination of pre-service teachers and identity development at two sites for teacher preparation: a large public university and a small liberal-arts college. The central objective of this study was to describe how a group of pre-service teachers thought about their developing identities as teachers – both in teacher education contexts but also as a larger picture of their identity-development trajectories. Study data varied widely, but analysis relied heavily upon the stories participants told me about their experiences in teacher preparation. My attempt to address issues of

representation in telling these stories involved creating a collaborative graphic novel text – which is to say one made up of contiguous images and text – with participants. The graphic novel's flexibility was particularly useful for work in teacher preparation; like the work of the teacher it is multi-layered and complex as simultaneously personal and public, emotional and intellectual work.

For this study, the pre-service participant *N* across both sites was 55; (51 white, 2 Latino/a, 1 African-American, 1 Arab-American; 15 males, 40 females). All participants were between the ages of 19 and 24. The majority of participants were white females in this age range, which is consistent with the pre-service teacher demographic in the US (Zumwalt and Craig, 2005). Over half participated in the graphic novel activity in some way. Procedural details for how participation was structured follow below.

### PROCEDURES

Procedures included pre-closure data collection as well as post-closure processes. The pre-closure steps resulted in recursive analytic gains enabling me to identify directions for further inquiry. I generally had already done one verbal interview prior to drawing with participants. At the drawing session(s) the researcher and participant went over the interview tape or a transcription if that was available. The researcher presented each participant with the task of representing the story they knew and the story they told in the interview in a visual style – in other words, creating a visual narrative of what the essence of that story was, incorporating as much or as little of the detail as they wanted.

For ethical reasons, it was of paramount importance that participants not feel pressured to draw if that was an uncomfortable task for them. To this end, I experimented with a variety of alternatives to encourage participation without being coercive. Participants who were not comfortable drawing were presented with the option of ceasing participation in the project, or having a verbal conversation about their narrative instead of drawing, or of collaborative drawing with the researcher. The latter was a kind of 'trading off': the participant and researcher would take turns drawing together according to the participant's guidelines. For those who wanted to 'trade off' I would draw a panel under their dictation, and they would draw one after that, alternating until the story was told to participant satisfaction. The majority of participants were comfortable creating an image on their own, though the optional nature of the task, and the alternatives available were made clear. Most of the drawing took place in the presence of the researcher, though several participants did their work independently and returned it to me later to talk about. I always made a copy of the work, with permission, and returned originals or copies to the participant.

### ETHICAL ISSUES AND RESEARCHER ROLE

For pre-service teachers, identity development is an important though often personal and unexplored part of becoming a teacher. An alternative text in which images and words are fixed contiguously may be uniquely adept to

this exploration: things that cannot be adequately explored in words may be supplemented by images (Weber and Mitchell, 1996). Additionally, as was the case in this study, getting adults to draw – a task many deem child-like – opens those individuals up to feelings of similarly child-like vulnerability: this side effect should be treated with care but not without value. Vulnerability may be an issue when asking research participants to take what many may feel is an emotional ‘risk’ – expressing themselves artistically in front of someone else. The researcher attempted to build rapport with and make participants feel as comfortable as possible while taking this kind of ‘risk’. Providing ample work time for drawing was essential for ensuring both maximum participant comfort and quality data. However, participants who were reluctant to draw for any reason were not cajoled or otherwise coerced into participation. Individuals who wanted to take materials home to think and possibly return at another time with their finished image, and those who changed their mind or opted not to participate at any stage in data collection, were able to do so without question.

One must be sensitive to the unavoidable power imbalance existing between researchers and study participants in such a context. In this study, the researcher was associated with the teacher education faculty at both sites, and while not in an instructional capacity with regard to any of the participants, attention to dynamics of power was crucial all the same. Careful recruitment and data collection, the integration of collaborative practices where appropriate and attention to researcher subjectivity through keeping a researcher journal and periodic auditing of the data were employed to address these issues (Peshkin, 1993).

Additionally, participants may have less facility with images than with traditional prose text, and this may be especially true for people in college and university settings, or others, like some pre-service teachers, whose facility with the writing tasks that dominate schooling has led to their remaining in or affiliated with schools (Lortie, 1972). The discomfort that could result from struggling with unfamiliar media should be foregrounded as a possible risk associated with study participation.

#### ANALYSIS OF VISUAL DATA

Drawing in part from photographic data analysis work (Chalfen, 1998) and literary criticism and text analysis (Scholes, 1985), visual data were analyzed using content analysis, frequency counts and participant interpretation of meaning. A reliable interpretation of image content should involve participant collaboration if an emic perspective is to be maintained and the assertion that meaning resides in participant ‘reading’ and understanding of the text, and that the text does not stand alone, or speak for itself. As in reader-response theory, the text is an evolving, interpreted body that depends upon the reader to imbue it with meaning – in this case, the participant ‘reads’ the text and the meanings assigned therein constitute one analysis, and a privileged emic one



TABLE 1 *Frequency of images in concrete representations*<sup>3</sup>

<i>Image type</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
Self-portraits	27
Classroom settings	13
Students or children	11
Teachers	11
Apples, Books, Chalkboards, ABCs, etc.	10

at that. As such, a text can have multiple, even conflicting meanings, and is inherently multi-vocal and dynamic. In short, the researcher should not be the sole 'reader' of the text. So, a collaborative approach to analysis, while not always possible in the context of this pilot application, should have a more central role in subsequent work.

An additional wrinkle in the analytic process was the fact that unlike some photographic image data, these images were created in response to researcher queries. In other words, it is possible to think about the graphic novel data set as part of an intervention or elicitation technique: these are not images that the participants most likely would have created in everyday life, but were instead a part of the process of reviewing their interview transcripts and retelling their stories about vocation and identity. As artifacts of research intended from their creation to be objects of conversation and interpretation, they may be interpreted in the same way that storytelling is, as a snapshot of the ever evolving performances of self (Goffman, 1959), encapsulated for a brief moment on the page. The reader must attend not only to what the participants say, but also to what they do and what they showcase for the audience as the sort of 'doing' they present on the page.

### *Participant data: stories of teachers, children, schooling and the self*

The analysis of the graphic novel panels, which is to say the contiguous sets of text and images created by participants, combines participant narratives about their work as well as frequency and content analysis of the panels themselves. The data fall into two categories: 1) concrete images intended by participants to primarily represent objects; and 2) abstract images intended by participants to represent feelings or ideas.

#### CONCRETE IMAGES

Table 1 reflects the recurring images and their frequency in concrete representations. While other images were present, the highest frequency images were of teachers, children, classroom settings and the self portrait. Please refer to Figures 1–12 for examples of each.

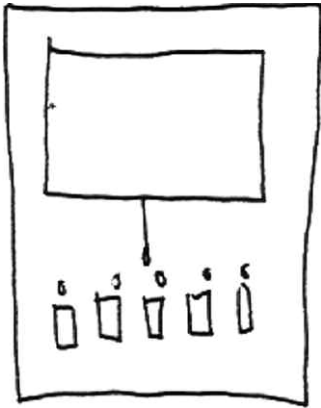


FIGURE 1

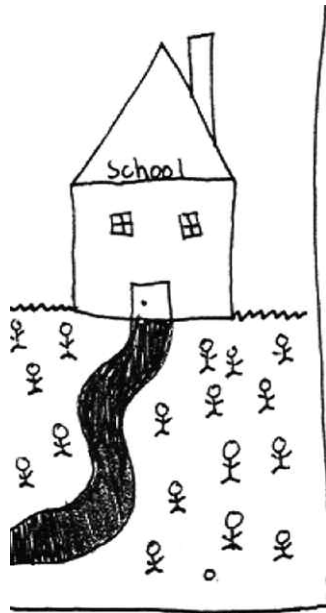


FIGURE 2

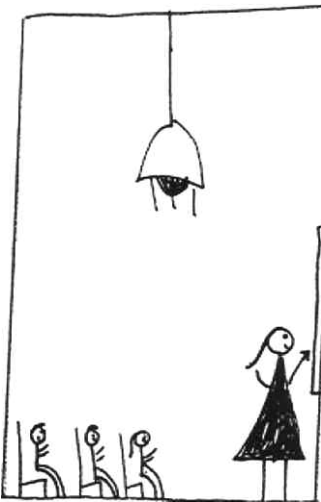


FIGURE 3

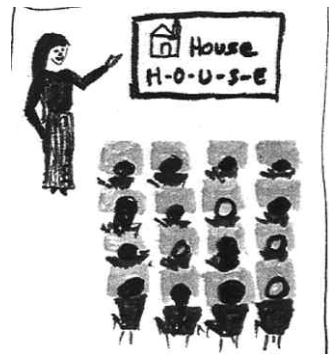


FIGURE 4

### *Children*

Children appeared significantly less frequently at the College site than at the University site.<sup>1</sup> At the University, children were frequently portrayed as students in classroom settings – they are typically represented by desks or as groups of simplified figures, as seen in Figures 1 and 2. Children do not appear in non-schooling settings, or in non-traditional learning settings, in any of the data from either site. This may indicate participant beliefs about the boundaries of learning settings, or the formality of schooling.

### *Classroom settings*

Classroom settings appeared as either elementary school settings or university teacher preparation settings. The elementary school settings were detailed, complete with many of the icons of schooling – small desks in neat rows, teachers' desks with apples on them and blackboards behind, lists of ABCs and 123s on the wall and perhaps also even small children learning at their own little desks (see Figures 3, 4 and 12). The university settings, which appeared exclusively in the University site data, were intended by participants to be School of Education settings, and were almost always negative, with actors in prone or defeated postures and speech bubbles or other text indicating, anxiety boredom and frustration. Figures 5 and 6 depict such scenes from teacher preparation. While Figure 5 shows the participant suffering through 'Big Lecture *Bleagh*', Figure 6 provides more of a narrative in which the participant, shown in the first panel in bed, saying 'I don't want to get out of bed' – 'I don't want to go to class' – depicts herself as a disembodied face with xed out eyes, being hit with 'Anxiety' as soon as she gets to the School of Education, whereupon she is launched into an 'existential crisis.' This last panel is abstract, as she writes, 'it's random, it's swirly, there's nothing to hang onto'.

### *Self-portraits*

The presence of self-portraits is not surprising given the autobiographical nature of the research question. While classroom scenes are plentiful, as discussed above, participants' self-portraits rarely situate themselves as teachers doing imagined work in classrooms. Similarly, children are rarely present in these self-portraits, except insofar as the individual is portrayed as a child. Instead, these self portraits typically depict scenes of negotiation; many of the University participants depicted themselves as anxious or in crisis, bored or unhappy, or otherwise experiencing dissonance in their teacher preparation program, as seen in Figure 6. Many of these same individuals provided orderly images of K-12 classrooms that by comparison could be called idyllic. These images from either participants' own schooling experiences or their imagined careers in teaching bookend the images from teacher preparation in many life trajectory sequences. Similarly, individuals at the smaller College site also created similar self portraits of themselves in environments other than classrooms

processing teacher education experiences, however these ‘negotiations’ were never depicted as stressful, dissonant experiences, but rather thoughtful reflections on themselves as learners who might or might not teach, but who were contemplating a richly projected possible life trajectory. Figure 7 shows a young woman contemplating the end of the school year and the end of her time interacting with children in what was a volunteering context; in the next frame is imagining herself working with children ‘for the rest of her life’, walking into the sunset that symbolizes the future (and, quite literally, the horizon). Figure 8, also from the College site, is a participant self-portrait of herself as the ‘devourer of knowledge’; this portrait is intended to highlight her identity as a learner – and a voracious one at that – devouring volumes ranging from mathematics, Japanese language and even a tiny Stonehenge made of little books. Her hunger for knowledge is literal and her contemplation of the future includes a steady diet of learning, regardless of ultimate classroom aspirations.

### *Teachers*

As in Figure 4, teachers appear as female in the vast majority of the data; most of the depictions involving teachers – like the depictions of classrooms discussed above – came from the University site. Additionally, these teachers are always depicted with children, in the classroom setting and are not self-portraits. Like Figure 4 and Figure 3, discussed earlier, these teachers are usually at the front of a traditionally arranged, orderly classroom, smiling and ‘teaching’ from the front of the classroom. Small group interactions, or one-on-one work with individual children, are never depicted.<sup>2</sup> The only exception to this pattern came from the College data, as one participant drew a picture of herself as a child interacting with a favorite teacher in an obviously affective capacity (see Figure 9). Not only was this the only intentional representation of a person of color in the entire data set, it was also the only depiction of teachers’ affective work. Considering that the vast majority of the primary-level University participants saw ‘caring’ as the primary work of the teacher – more important than content area instruction – it is interesting that this image came from the College data and that images like it are absent from the University set.

### ABSTRACT IMAGES

While most of the data from both sites was concrete in nature, participants at both sites created abstract pieces. These were often missing contiguous ‘text’ in the traditional sense of the graphic novel, but were accompanied by narratives in which the participant explained what he or she intended to depict. It is possible that participants were more comfortable rendering abstract images than concrete ones, but many of the participants who created abstract pieces affirmed that these pieces were intended to represent experiences that they were still thinking about and integrating into their story of self.

Abstract images were often used to represent crisis, uncertainty or other complex processes of identity development and professional discernment. One

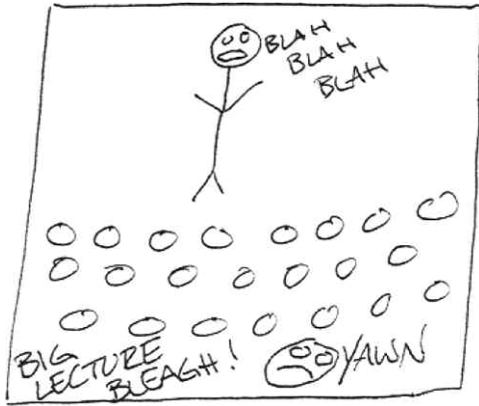


FIGURE 5

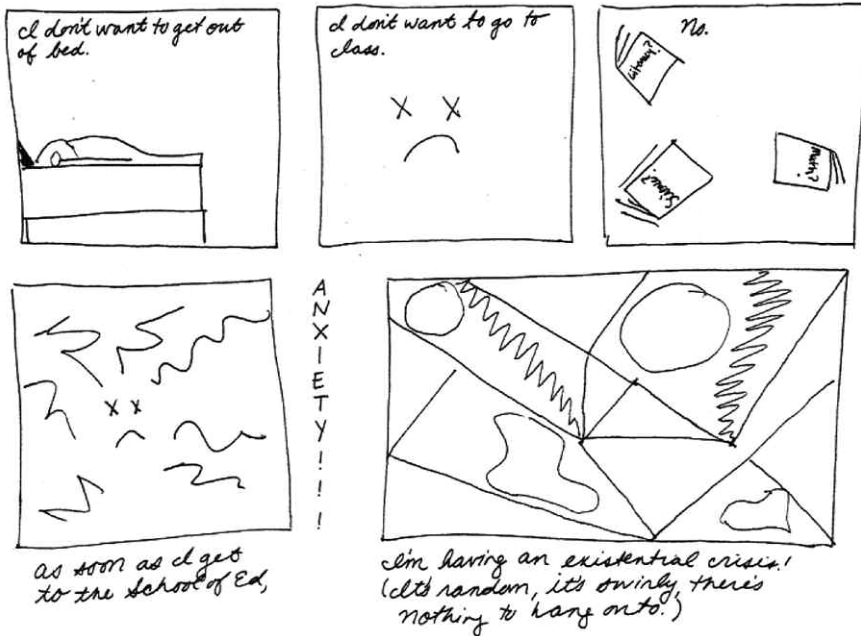


FIGURE 6

female participant from the University site (Figure 10) said that her abstract forms represented an 'existential crisis' and the various pressures, fears and uncertainties associated with her forecasted career trajectory, as well as the resolution of some of those uncertainties. She writes that 'the different shades represent changes in my family and career over time,

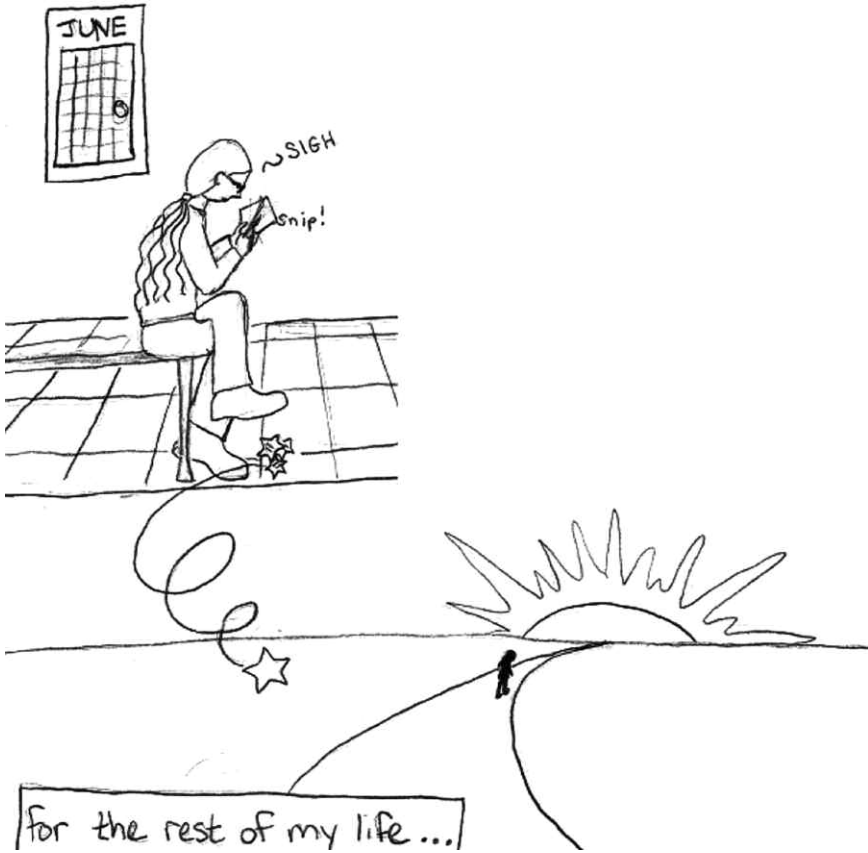


FIGURE 7



FIGURE 8



FIGURE 9



FIGURE 10

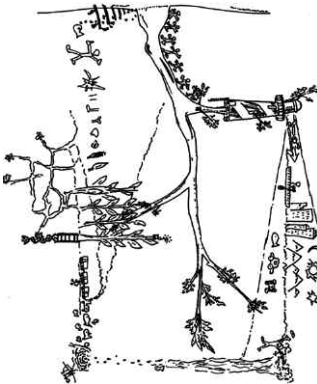


FIGURE 11

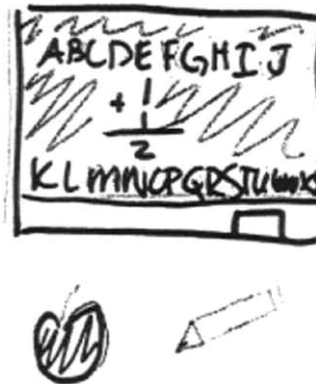


FIGURE 12

the S shape represents all the parts of me that do not have to do with becoming a teacher or with schools – this includes important things that are separate from work, like hobbies, sports and friends. This shape fades towards the top because that will change and evolve over time. The shape in the middle represents my becoming a teacher; right now I am the grey part in the middle – but I used to be the black part, that was when I was having lots of fears about teaching. I've gotten over some of these fears but I still worry a lot about his becoming the biggest part of the piece, the most dominant shape. I hope to sometime reach the white section at the top, which represents not having any anxiety about becoming a teacher and also intersects a little with the circle representing my family. This intersection can mean many things but hopefully that my family will understand my profession and accept my intellect and identify with me a little more. The shapes in the back represent failure, anxiety and worry about failing at teaching.

Like so many of the participants from the University site, this participant is grappling with fear, anxiety and the complex process of identity development: negotiating the many parts of herself into the 'teacher' identity and work. Meanwhile, the College site participant who created Figure 11 was experiencing a similar process of negotiation and integration. Like many College participants, this individual's process of identity development involved contemplating the value of learning from an intellectual, theoretical and ideological perspective. While there are concrete elements to Figure 11, which is intended to represent a life trajectory that may or may not include a career in the classroom, the arrangement is decidedly abstract. The discussion about its meaning was similarly indicative of a process of integrating many – often conflicting – ideas of self and work into a single narrative.<sup>4</sup> The dissonance the University participant describes is absent from the image and its accompanying narrative; instead, this is a dizzyingly complex negotiation of ideology and ideas:

The [school] I went to was especially wonderful, it was right on the river and we take walks through the woods and learn about the palms and the trees and it was a marvelous experience in that sense for personal and emotional development... I've done some reading on some educational theories on my own, and reading Robert Fried, *The Passionate Teacher* – I'm reading it right now and it's terrific. Also, Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education* and a few others. I'm also going through the Education minor here and the foundations of education class. I may then go on to law school, perhaps. Law school has always been there, Um, it's I think that it is one of the most important things because we live in a Democracy – a human being's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but a human being's capacity for injustice makes democracy a necessity. In that we need checks and balances, and what we're seeing what we're seeing today, with declining voter turnout, with so many people turned off to politics, then we lose the unique nature of democracy – and what education can do is it can ensure that that happens. We can't have democracy with an illiterate multitude. And democracy – I'm assuming – is good. A culture of learning allows people to go their own way, find who they are and then to really, uh, make us who we are as human beings. There's a human agenda... But there is some kind of order, there is something. And that is, um, that is a religious element that I discovered on my own that I use to support – or, rather, to be the root or the base of all my political, my teaching, kind of springs from. I didn't come to



this until I got to – I started out with kind of a liberal presupposition about how the world works, but I've grown much more nuanced in my understanding of how intrinsic evil, self-interest, greed, whatever, is to the human nature – how challenging the quest for justice is. It is fantastic but by no means is justice easy. Politics is generally regarded as a snake pit – but rightfully so – but what I formerly idolized as some notion of the good or some notion of political harmony I have discovered that it is a fiction. That's my hypothesis now. I've now latched onto a Whiteheadian notion of God as a self-surpassing surpasser of all, just some sort of notion that whatever point we take, we can go beyond that point, our capacity for self-transcendence. So, there's a danger of relativism, of linguistic constructions – but there is still all kinds of room and all kinds of potential for doing good in this world and that while it may not change the whole zeitgeist but it might change this right here and this right here might be the difference in thousands and thousands of lives. If I teach for 20 years, if I get involved in politics, who knows?

This participant created an image to accompany and reflect his process of identity development and negotiation that he suggested should 'speak for itself' in reference to his narrative of becoming, above. However, in asking him to identify some of the concrete figures that are brought together to create the abstract piece, it is interesting to note that compared with the concrete representations – all of which included references to the classroom, pictures of teachers, students and so on – his contains none of these. Rather, the lighthouse, nature sequences involving trees, plants and small animals, DNA double-helix and small human figures are personal and are intended to represent a cycle of thought and the integration of life experience into a planned trajectory that may or may not include work as a teacher.

It is possible to think about all of the images created by participants, and the stories they told in teacher education contexts, as performances – or negotiations – of their valued identity (Goffman, 1959). What individuals choose to highlight in representations, like the story they choose to tell, is an important facet of their developing identity. The participant who creates an abstract piece representing a circular and complex intellectual process as his identity development trajectory is very different from the participant who draws a classroom scene with traditional rows of desks, a smiling teacher and other icons of schooling, as seen in Figure 12. So also the participant who shows herself in the grip of anxiety, or 'existential crisis' being quite literally crushed by the teacher education experience shows the reader an individual negotiating unexpected dissonance and persevering despite these difficult circumstances.

### *Discussion: flexibility and narrative*

One contemporary critique of the narrative 'turn' in qualitative research may also apply to visual methods: presenting the visual 'narrative' as a text that 'speaks for itself' is problematic (Atkinson and Delamont, 2006). The difficulty in analyzing visual data may be one of the reasons for its limited use (Prosser, 1998), but exploring and developing analytic techniques for use with a variety

of image-based and other data may contribute to more widespread application. As in this study, treating visual data as a kind of 'text' and subsequently incorporating diverse analytic techniques from social science and the humanities has proven helpful. Additionally important is analytic collaboration with participants. This goes beyond 'member checking' and constitutes deeper participant involvement in analyzing their own images. While conditions in this study did not allow for as much in-depth participant involvement in data analysis as would have been ideal, future work in visual methods might benefit from a richer view of participant collaboration and data analysis, when appropriate.

While not a resolution of the representational dilemma, this pilot has shed light on some of its dimensions. While Volkman and Anderson (1998) combine Goffman's (1959) performance theory and teacher stories to present a picture of new chemistry teachers and their struggles in the classroom, they offer the caveat: 'we urge the reader to build a three dimensional figure of [the participant] from our two-dimensional representations.' I interpret this third dimension to be the one that transforms a story into a performance, a 'script' into an actual play because presenting a story in a different, not necessarily verbal way requires a different kind of thinking for the participant, a different kind of listening from the researcher and results in a different kind of product. To reiterate: the drawing is a kind of performance, and it tells us what participant words and stories look like in motion. So, I believe that it is possible to get at some aspects of that third dimension by using the graphic novel as such a mini-performance, or enactment of the written story. While the graphic novel approach began as an attempt to address issues of representation, its real strength is in allowing participants to create a performance – complete with pen-and-ink actors, sets, scripts, dialogue and the like – to make a drama of their words. Ultimately, some representational concerns may also be addressed as issues of validity; by providing readers with enough rich, thick description of both participant data and methodological procedures they may judge for themselves both the study's internal validity and the application of findings to various contexts (Merriam, 1998).

Finally, it is important to note that the use of contiguous text and image do not, as I initially thought when conceptualizing this project, somehow create a text that is more resilient and resistant to the dominance of the researcher-voice. Indeed, the approach may present a host of additional representation problems, especially considering the variety of alternative approaches made available to participants who were uncomfortable with drawing alone. Rather than treating the graphic novel method as a 'silver bullet' intended for liberal administration to cure all subjectivity and representational ills, the text genre itself is no more resistant to the interpretive filter than traditional prose. The strengths of the graphic novel approach lie in its richly textured snapshot of participant experience, its possibilities for collaboration and its acknowledgment that participant stories go beyond the margins of the text and that stories themselves are more than the single dimension of monologue can adequately

reproduce. This is not a suggestion that traditional prose texts are in any way inadequate: rather we should remain flexible as to how we define the nature of a research text. The changing participant pool and the changing understanding of research methods and reporting require a wider array of methods, not just the substitution of one for another.

### *Conclusion: revisiting 'truthfulness' and 'faithfulness' in qualitative research*

In writing and thinking about participant representation, there may be a temptation to refer to the 'truthfulness' and 'authenticity' of one's attempts therein. While words like these, hinting as they do at the existence of a knowable, universal 'truth' or an uncontested ideal of the 'authentic', may be a comforting mirage at times, ultimately their use denies the realities of the role of both artists and messenger. The nature of qualitative research affirms the existence of multiple truths and multiple arbiters of what is true or authentic; as artists, researchers must work to find ways to balance the multiplicity of poly-vocal texts, realities and 'readers'. To assume a single truth and authenticity is to deny the artist her careful work. However, meanwhile, the messenger strives to deliver her 'message' in a way that is truthful, but to claim an absolute truth or authenticity suggests that the messenger – who is also a 'reader' of the data text – serves little purpose.

But the artist and the messenger are both committed to the integrity of participant voice. If truth and authenticity are inappropriate measures of quality in representation, perhaps 'faithfulness' to participant stories and experiences is a better yardstick. Being faithful, unlike being true or authentic, implies a commitment to an idea or thing in which that entity is the center and yardstick against which claims of value are measured. A researcher can strive to be faithful to participant stories and experiences, presenting a faithful rendering of their original form and being faithful to participant meanings and understandings. Also implicit in the goal of faithfulness is the idea of the limitations of striving – which is to say that though the researcher will strive to be faithful, the limitations presented by their individual subjectivity, however closely audited, must still be taken into account.

Eisner (1997) warns that when doing new things it is important to be sure, 'if we can be, that we are not substituting novelty and cleverness for substance' (p. 9). In this study, the use of the graphic novel exposed another layer of meaning that illuminated the nature of participants' developing identities, but the approach was not without flaws. Continued work is needed to develop the collection and analysis of visual data to prevent it from being construed as an 'add-on' at best and mere 'novelty' at worst. The arts allow us to step both deeper inside and outside of ourselves and our experiences (Cahnmann, 2006), and perhaps in doing so take some risks as researchers. Images, like the icons used by participants to indicate classroom life – like apples, chalkboards

and desks – are culturally and historically situated, and as such their interpretation should include the full participation of the individuals who create them.

## NOTES

1. This is possibly because participants at the College site were in a less firmly committed position vis-à-vis their career discernment process. University participants were enrolled in a formal licensure program. While College participants were enrolled in an Education minor program – most with the intention of becoming teachers in alternative or 5th year licensure programs after graduation – they had not made a career commitment in the same way as the University group. Many would comment in interviews and other settings that they had not ruled out other career paths, such as practicing Law or Medicine. Notably, the depictions of children at the College site were almost always self-portraits from a participants' own apprenticeship of observation, and like Figure 9, were highly affective.
2. Coughlin and Seldin (2001) suggest that pre-service teachers will include more varied and student-interaction-focused images, such as teacher working with students in small groups, once they have had more experience in the classroom setting.
3. Images that appeared fewer than two times are not listed
4. It is also lengthy. As such, only a small portion is excerpted here.

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