



Comics as Mental Health Information Resources: Understanding the Graphic Medicine Community

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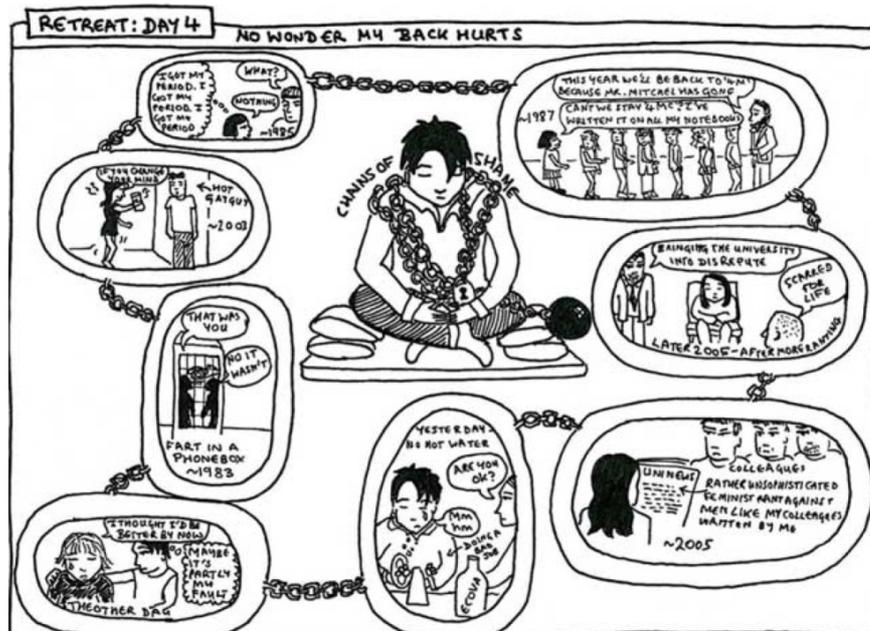
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'No wonder my back hurts' (Barker, M. 2013: 34). © Meg-John Barker 2013

The following post is a short summary of the article "Graphic Medicine' as a Mental Health Information Resource: Insights from Comics Producers' published on 6 February 2016 on [The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship](#).

The citation for our article is:

Farthing, A and Priego, E 2016 'Graphic Medicine' as a Mental Health Information Resource: Insights from Comics Producers. *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship*, 6(1): 3, pp. 1–23, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.16995/cg.74>

Comics Grid readers might be aware of the growth in health-related comics in recent years. The term 'Graphic Medicine' was coined by Ian Williams to describe these publications and 'to denote the role that comics can play in the study and delivery of healthcare' ('[Why Graphic Medicine?](#)'). While much of this material is biomedical in focus, there is now a substantial amount of work relating to mental-health conditions too. Could some of this material be suitable for training psychology and social-care

students?

In a bid to answer this question, 15 interviews were conducted with professionals in relevant roles throughout the comics industry. By taking the opportunity to talk to creators about the motivations and processes of their work, it was hoped to explore the nature of the comics they produce and discover how they might fit in the context of mental-health training. It was also considered necessary to discover whether the way comics are produced and distributed might have implications for their adoption as academic texts or learning aids, so publishers and retailers were included in the research too.

Two major themes emerged during the interviews: the influence of networks (whether they be social, professional or digital), and how cultural associations shape activities in any arena where comics are being used or discussed.

Casey Brienza has proposed that comics production is facilitated by a 'network of social interactions' (2010: 107) and this seemed to be the case for the interviewees in this project. The type of interactions varied and included encouragement from peers, as exemplified by one artist's description of social media enabling solitary creators to keep in touch with colleagues. The support and opportunities that these networks afford were recognised by all participants and vociferously prized by many.

The manifestations of comics' cultural associations that emerged can be related to Freedman's description of how the nature of comics 'confounds the distinction between academic and amateur scholarship' (Freedman 2011: 29). Comics can influence any discipline where comics become central to the discourse and is also reflected in the way formal and informal specialisation become obscured – for instance, both small-scale individual creators of mental-health education comics and high-profile publishers use conventions to make sales and leverage connections within the comics industry, even when the established publishing houses have access to extensive retail distribution and media promotion.

To fully assess the value of comics to mental health training, we thought it was necessary to understand its community's contribution to the publications that are produced. While this sense of community and support is highly valued among comics professionals, it is not necessarily understood in wider academia. Peer support doesn't offer the same perceived reassurances as peer review, and feedback from buyers at comics conventions isn't the same as the contributions of professional editors.

However, experiences of mental illness are being communicated in comics form and, if potentially useful documents aren't going to be overlooked, it's argued that producers should make more effort to reach academia, and academia must consider new types of material to enhance teaching. Intermediaries such as librarians and information professionals could play a key role in forging these links.

As well as generously sharing their expertise to allow the writing and publication of the [article](#), the participants in this research project also gave their written consent for transcripts of the full interviews to be released as a qualitative Open Access data set.

It's exciting to be able to make this data (which does not contain sensitive nor patient information) available on Open Access repositories, including [Tavistock and Portman Staff Publications](#) – providing it in this way is as important as the scholarship of the accompanying article. It's hoped that other researchers will use the data set in their own work and explore comics and education in ways that were beyond the scope and ambition of this project – we'd be delighted to hear from anyone who does.

Note

We are delighted to be able to present components of this research at the [Graphic Medicine 2016 conference](#) at the University of Dundee this year!

References

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