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Turning Ourselves Inside Out: Reading and Creating Graphic Medicine in Community

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Abstract: An interdisciplinary team designed a graphic medicine project to address health inequalities, implementing it in public libraries with underserved populations. Participants read graphic novels about experiences with illness, then create a 4-8 panel comic about a health-related experience of their own. Research questions are 1) what personal insights about health arise when reading and discussing graphic narratives? and 2) what community insights about health arise when creating and sharing stories in the comics format?

Issues addressed and potential significance of the work

The recent pandemic has brought mainstream attention to the health disparities beneath the surface of our wealthy nation. Researchers attending to these issues know that underserved populations such as Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds suffer not only from lack of access to health care, but also access to health information. This paucity of information is actually a two-way street – while these populations receive less health information, their health experiences remain underrepresented in medical research. The health perspectives and experiences of underserved groups must be brought forward and made visible to decrease persistent health inequalities.

An effective tool for addressing this inequality in health information comes from the emergent field of graphic medicine. Graphic medicine refers to health narratives and medical information created and shared in the format of comics, which, when collected, create a sequential art story called a graphic novel. Originally conceived as a way to increase the empathy of medical students, it has expanded to include the communication of health information to various populations as well as a tool for participatory personal expression of health experiences. In their *Graphic Medicine Manifesto*, the interdisciplinary field's founders state, "Graphic medicine is also a movement for change that challenges the dominant methods of scholarship in healthcare, offering a more inclusive perspective of medicine, illness, disability, caregiving, and being cared for" (Czerwiec, et al, 2015).

This paper reports the initial findings from a graphic medicine project hosted by public libraries in three communities with underserved populations, including rural and urban locations. The project curriculum was iteratively designed by an interdisciplinary team, which includes researchers from learning sciences, information science, English, journalism, and health services. The project research questions are 1) what personal insights about health arise when reading and discussing graphic narratives? and 2) what community insights about health arise when creating and sharing stories in the comics format?

Theoretical and methodological approaches

Our research is guided by sociocultural-historical theories, bringing the focus of the analysis to people learning in context through mediational means, in this case, language and images (Cole, 1996). Graphic novels lend themselves to Bakhtinian analysis through their heteroglossic structure that "borrows pervasively from other cultural genres and discourses, and in doing so appropriates a range of cultural and intellectual ideas and narrative and discursive forms" (McCallum, 1999, p. 258). Through the lens of "funds of knowledge," we view the participants as "competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge" (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005, p. x). Each participant brings their funds of knowledge to the library program and actively produces meanings for the texts they read, discuss, create, and share. As researchers, our close attention to these activities in context illuminates the informal learning experience.

This qualitative research project takes the form of a comparative case study (Merriam, 2009) in three public libraries. A maximum of 10 patrons sign up through each library location, for a total of 30 participants. Data includes a) pre- and post-program surveys about experiences with graphic novels/comics and with health and health care, b) video recordings of the eight online program sessions, and c) the four to eight panel comic stories created by participants.

The research team qualitatively codes data from the surveys, sessions, and participant-created comics through the lens of the previously discussed theoretical framework. Team members complete a round of open coding, then compare results to create a series of closed codes. Using these closed codes, team members re-code

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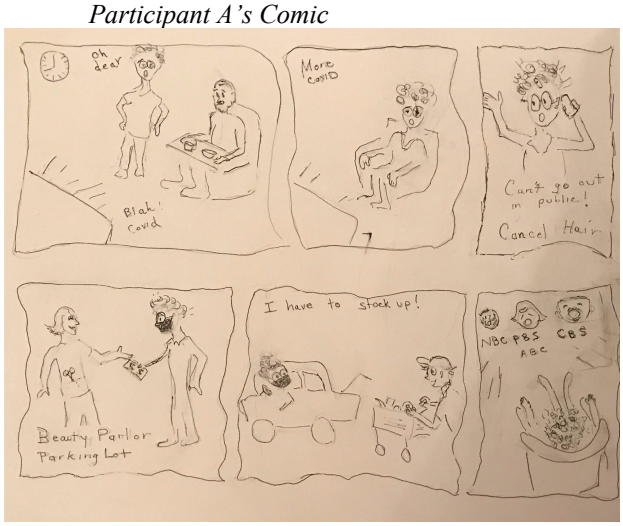
the data corpus until an acceptable level of agreement is reached (Merriam 2009). This process will be completed by June 2022.

Findings and implications

Initial findings come from a rural library, where the solicitated participants were older adults in their 60's and 70's. Led by a member of the research team, the group first discussed the book *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person: A Memoir in Comics* by Miriam Engelberg, followed by *My Degeneration: A Journey Through Parkinson's* by Peter Dunlap-Schohl. In the earliest conversations, participants often commented on new knowledge gained about the disease discussed, i.e., "I didn't know that…" As discussions continued, participants shared more of their personal health experiences the had some similarities to the experiences of the comic authors. A common theme amongst these senior citizens was concern about losing greater control of their bodies and the burden it will place upon others.

While initially apprehensive about their ability to create a comic, they all reported feeling capable thanks to the step-by-step coaching from another member of the research team. In the next to last session, this member asked everyone to reflect on a moment from their experiences in the pandemic in order to create a storyboard. As they shared their drawings, common themes arose of anxiety and its impact on the body. For example, in Figure 1, Participant A uses motion lines to represent information bombarding her, with the final panel showing her body shaking while watching the news.

Figure 1
Participant A's Comic



As the project continues in new locations with different kinds of participants, the research team look forward to comparing and contrasting the insights about health that the graphic medicine format affords people both personal and as a community.

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