

UNDERSTANDING GRAPHIC NARRATIVE AS A MARKETING EDUCATION TOOL

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Abstract

Topics such as sales and ethics require students to practice skills in perspective taking and empathy as part of the educational process. This paper introduces and explains the graphic narrative as a learning format that offers significant potential for marketing education in areas that require students to more cognitively observe, interpret and reflect upon interactions amongst characters in complex settings and environments. Principles of graphic narrative design are discussed and illustrated by example, to enhance the understanding and power of the tool for marketing education.

Introduction

Comics in marketing, as both commodity and promotional tool, are not new. Still, the varied use and benefits of the tool have expanded far beyond the ad story appeal of Mac the 90 pound weakling who no longer had sand kicked in his face thanks to the graces of Charles Atlas body building services, or the premium value demonstrated by the stories of “Bazooka Joe” in the comic strip wrappings of Bazooka bubble gum. Much of what makes comic art appealing in communicating persuasive promotional messages also makes it powerful as a teaching tool. This paper explores the fundamental elements of graphic narrative construction that inspires the power of the genre in educating persons about any range of topics. The theoretical exposition is intended to enthruse future research on the use of graphic narratives in marketing education, and inspire more informed design and development of such materials in topical areas of marketing best suited to the genre.

Comic Art as Communication Medium

A simple definition of comic art embodies the use of sequential art that tells a story through picture/text combinations. Vivid images of superman and batman may occupy the minds of those who are mainly familiar with the history of the comic art design appearing in newspaper comic strips or superhero themed stories. In reality, comic art aka graphic narrative has a history that is far richer and complex than most imagine. The origins of the genre are often traced back as far as artifacts such as Mexican codex, Egyptian hieroglyphics and eighteenth century art (McCloud 1996). Though scholars debate the first definitive example of comic art,

the publication of Richard Outcault's *Hogan's Alley* in the late 1890s is one of the first "comics" that best exemplifies several of the key attributes that make comics particularly relevant to marketing education. *Hogan's Alley* used both text and visual iconography to tell a story of a character within a specific temporal and spatial context. *Hogan's Alley* conveyed information about the life experiences of Mickey Dugan aka The Yellow Kid - an Irish street urchin in a time of rising consumerism and class separation. The comic series focused on highly adult oriented themes and provided sociopolitical commentary embedded in a graphic narrative format that invited reflection on issues relevant to the period and its culture.

The "graphic novel" terminology is typically viewed as a more recent addition to the study of comic art, popularized with the advent of Will Eisner's (1978) *Contract with God* and the Pulitzer Prize winning *Maus* by Art Spiegelman (1991). Indeed, most scholars suggest that the popularity of the late twentieth century novels bolstered the legitimacy of graphic narrative as relevant to all age groups and reinvigorated interest in the scholarly study of the format as literary art form and persuasive communication tool. Though the length of graphic novels and/or the focus on more adult themed content generally delineate the form of comic art, this form and even shorter versions of comics illustrate key features of the medium that is more broadly termed graphic narrative. For purposes of this paper, we offer a definition that borrows heavily from McCloud's (1996) definition of comics. Specifically, we define a graphic narrative as a communications tool that uses juxtaposed visual and textual elements, deliberately sequenced as frames/panels, to tell a story with character(s), setting and plot, to convey information and/or produce desired behavioral, cognitive and affective responses from the viewer. Length of the narrative is not critical in constraining the domain of interest, but the implicit assumption is that the resolution of the story plot in a graphic novel requires multiple frames/panels over multiple pages.

Media Format for Learning

Until recently, proposing the idea of graphic narrative as an educational and/or training tool would receive a negative response in most quarters. However, many contemporary scholars have begun to research *visual pedagogy*, a method of teaching that relies upon materials that use picture/text combinations similar to what is found in graphic novel formats (Tabachnick 2009). A number of learning scholars today argue that text-only materials no longer meet the needs of students who seek visual engagement and rely on visual images as a source of comprehension while sorting through a plethora of digital information, technology, and media

communications (Lawrence et al 2009). While pedagogical uses of graphic novels first gained popularity in secondary education to engage students with varied content domains such as English literacy, visual literacy, media literacy, art history and social studies, more recently graphic novels are recognized as useful for higher education levels including fields as diverse as anthropology and medicine. Even in mainstream society, academicians use the graphic novel format to convey complex information to adults as evidenced by MIT economics professor Jonathan Gruber's contributions to the graphic novel *Health Care Reform: What it is, Why it's necessary, How it works* (2011). The graphic novel is used to inform the adult public about the Affordable Care Act and its implications.

The value of graphic narratives in the instruction of many disciplines stems from the medium's ability to invoke empathetic responses and perspective taking from its readers. Literary scholars include graphic novels such as *Maus* and *Persepolis* to explain the historical, political, religious, and social contexts that shape perspectives and inform students on issues of diversity (Moran 2007). Medical educators find similar benefits from a more specific form of graphic narrative known as *graphic pathographies*. Graphic pathographies use comic art to educate people about disease and make explicit the mind of a diagnosed person, showing their authentic rather staged reactions, and their struggles with denial and other thoughts and behaviors that undermine their health treatment (Cornog 2009). The graphic pathographies are thought to be particularly valuable as a teaching tool because the medium prepares persons for what will happen, physically, mentally and emotionally, through the progression of a disease. As opposed to video, graphic pathographies portray discrete events/moments in time and place intentional pauses in the progression of events which require and invite reflection on things (not) seen and (not) said within the panels. This time "in the gutter" foster empathy in caregivers and promotes deductive diagnosis skills, requiring the reader to visualize what happens between the panels. The heightened and combined powers of observation, empathetic projection, and enhanced interpretative abilities are seen to be significant benefits relevant to medical education.

Beyond matters of empathy and perspective taking, researchers also argue that the use of graphic novels also differentially affect what is also going on in the structure on one's brain as he/she is processing information.

"Research has shown how combining pictures and text enhances understanding, as the activities of reading and viewing activate different information processing systems within the

brain (Mayer and Sims 1994)...foster(ing) connections between new information and existing knowledge, thereby increasing recall of health information..." (Green and Myers, 2010, p.576)

Event Segmentation Theory (EST), grounded in neuroscience, suggests that "(b)y reducing a continuous flux of activity to a modest number of discrete events, a perceiver can achieve terrific economy of representation for perception and later memory" (Zacks and Swallow, 2007, p.83). Assuming the logic of EST and the intuitive understanding of storytelling, graphic narratives may provide an intuitively appealing mechanism by which marketers can more effectively organize information for greater learning and memory.

Graphic Narrative for Marketing Education

Arguably, the same value provided by graphic narratives to education in the humanities and medicine parallel much of what is needed in many areas of marketing education, particularly in the domains of personal selling and ethics. Research supports the importance of empathy, observational and interpretive skills in the success of salespersons and in the success of buyer-seller interactions (Comer and Drolliner 1999; Langer 1967; McBane 1995). Within the context of ethics instruction, perspective taking is clearly highly relevant to the task as well. Indeed, Brennan et al. (2010) refer to training scenarios used in medicine and nursing science as a model for ethics instruction in marketing education. Though the authors do not acknowledge any awareness of graphic novels/pathographies as part of the medical curriculum, their case rests on teaching "the idea of alterity and the appreciation of the experiences of otherness in the tutor's relationship with students" (Brennan et al., 2010, p.1175). Scholars of comic art expressly recognize how graphic narrative design can be used to affect a sense of "otherness" thus allowing the graphic novel developer considerable power in enhancing this characteristic to benefit learning (McCloud 1996; Royal 2007).

Given the promise of the medium as a valuable learning format, we dedicate the remainder of this paper to a discussion of the unique structural and design elements of graphic narrative and how these can be differentially employed to affect empathy and perspective taking in the creation of graphic novels. We conclude with a sample excerpt used to teach ethics in sales to better illustrate the concepts and potential of the medium. Though the reader may not have the illustration skills to create his/her own graphic narrative, at worst the discussion will assist in providing a discerning eye to the educator when selecting from among existing graphic narratives for instructional purposes. At best, the discussion may inspire collaborative efforts

directed towards the creation of more content appropriate graphic narratives that can be used to advance marketing education.

Affect the Reader Experience

Arguably, graphic narrative creators believe a discussion of the differential contributions of verbal and visual elements in narrative construction is somewhat tautological as text is itself an illustration of visual iconography (McCloud 1996). While text arguably provides the highest level of abstraction of an event or piece of information, the abstraction is commonplace and known to the reader, thus removing much of its immediacy and emotional impact for the reader (McCloud, 1996). Clearly, highly detailed visual images and depictions can be “more visceral than the unadorned printed word” (Goldsmith, 1998, p. 1510), but more abstract albeit incomplete images can achieve the same level of impact through the embellishment created in the mind of the reader. It is “the time in the gutter” that provides a mechanism by which marketing educators can reduce the overt risk of overstepping social and cultural boundaries when portraying sensitive issues while still maximizing the reflection and perspective taking of the reader.

Royal (2007) offers that the more abstract the drawing is, the more the reader identifies with the subject through "masking". Alternatively, the more photo-realistic the image is, the greater the projection of "otherness" to the characters in the story. The level of abstraction thus presents opportunities to affect consumers' identification with and/or reverence for characterizations of alternative characters, qualities, objects and activities. Consider the example shown in Figure 1, excerpted from a manga style narrative used by a Japanese manufacturer of volleyball equipment (Ishikawa and Hayashi 2010). Notice the higher level of realism used in portrayal of the Japanese national league player. The realistic style may convey initial emotional reactions of reverence and awe, while the switch to a more abstract portrayal involves greater identification with the subsequent story and events.

The use of symbolism in the characterization of graphic novel characters can also invoke empathy with particular traits or qualities of the character. Eisner (2008, p.11) emphasizes the importance of stereotypical visual images, “an accursed necessity,” that allow the reader to reference stored memory of experiences and information to quickly and augment visualization of an idea or process to derive meaning from the narrative. Because semiotics is culturally embedded, designers must be conversant with visual standards of reference that will speak either uniquely to the audience targeted and/or are universally valid and interpretable. Eisner

(2008, p.14) offers that animal-based images often provide universal transferability and successful readability for storylines and characterizations (see Figure 2).

The marketing literature clearly recognizes the power of verbal only narratives in the extensive research done relevant to narrative transportation and its role in advertising, but the power of persons' imaginings can be greatly affected by what is (not) done with the textual information in the context of a graphic narrative. Scott McCloud (2006) eloquently summarizes the pivotal role and contribution of words to the comic art form.

"Words evoke feelings, sensations and abstract concepts which pictures alone can only begin to capture; they're comics' only traditional ink with the warmth and nuance of the human voice; they offer comics creators the opportunity to compress and expand time; and when words and pictures work interdependently, they can create new ideas and sensation beyond the sum of the parts." (p.128)

Similar to visual elements, the selection and even de-selection of words can affect the reader's participation in construction of meaning and conveyance of emotion for the reader. Narrative implicature refers to meaning conveyed by that which is not said in a speaker's explicit words. "In effect, the ability to understand the narrator is contributed not by the information provided in the text (as in the explicit version) but by readers themselves as they attempt to understand the narrative on the basis of the principle of narratorial cooperativeness" (Kotovych et al. 2011, p. 19). The process works much the same as abstraction in other design elements that entail attributing the reader's own knowledge and experiences to characters, activities and settings to address gaps or inconsistencies in the storyline.

Finally, visual depictions of the verbal text are also used to manipulate perspective taking and empathetic introspection. Stylistic choices in the construction of word balloons and narratorial boxes instruct the reader as to the source of the text. Rounded balloons constructed with solid lines imply traditional spoken language whereas the use of cloud-like edges or rectangular formats traditionally conveys thoughts and third-person expository speech, respectively (White-Schwoch and Rapp 2011). The visual and textual construction of onomatopoeic sound effects can vary greatly as illustrated by the panels reproduced in Figure 3 from McCloud (2010, p.147). In the minds of graphic narrative creators, the true power of words and images used independently and interdependently in storytelling is the extent to which these elements engage the reader in the construction of the story.

A Sample Excerpt of A Marketing Education Graphic Narrative

Appendix 1 contains pages of a graphic narrative used to teach ethics in the context of personal selling. Originally produced for the development of ethics education in the classroom, the graphic novel is currently under testing with several sales organizations throughout the United States. Funding for the graphic novel is supported by the Daniels Fund Initiative. Daniel Fund Ethics Initiative is a program dedicated to building a high level of ethical standards in students, campuses and the community. Today, the Ethics Initiative is a partnership between eight business schools in Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, and Wyoming (“Daniels Fund” 2012). Ethical efficacy is reported as a single scale including multiple dimensions of motivation, self-efficacy, value and importance to ethics and ethics education.

The appendix example displays the character, Elle Fountane, a sales representative for a well-known adhesive company that has been experiencing a difficult time selling the organizations newest products. Pressure from management and frustration leads her to escalate her entertainment expenses for customers. Although entertaining is a common selling practice, the escalation of entertainment expenses can be considered a bribery technique. For example, taking a customer out for dinner in order to discuss the newest business products or to refresh a customer relationship is traditionally business as usual. However, increasing entertainment costs and escalation of gifts can unintentional force customer to purchase products that are not needed by the organization and therefore a form of unethical behavior.

In the excerpt Elle, a well-established sales representative, is rejected by many established customers becoming increasingly disappointed and frustrated with her selling skills. She resorts to using highly desired baseball tickets by the prospective customer as her way to gain his business. In the graphic novel, the reader or the sales trainee, can see the emotion and read her thoughts and feelings. For example, the first tickets are merely a friendly gesture to the regular customer. When Elle continues to purchase the tickets as a way to ‘bribe’ the customer, the reader can see her facial expression change. In the sales training scenario, research has found that Elle is not the only one to blame for the escalation of the bribe. Pressure from her superiors to sell products to her customers forces her to try tactics she may not usually use in the field.

Graphic novels may be an important tool for portraying the emotion of a salesperson, especially for those less familiar with the selling arena. For example, Elle’s thoughts on ‘what to do’ and her expression is portrayed in the graphic novel, providing the less experienced salesperson a

glimpse on at what may go on in the mind of the seller or buyer during a similar experience. In the graphic novel, emotion is read in the words and seen in the face of the characters, enabling the reader to put themselves into the situation. Additionally, the graphic novel gives the reader the opportunity to fill in the 'gutter,' where they may find themselves discerning how they would handle this type of situation.

The graphic novel story as a form of fiction helps the trainees practice empathy in the state of affairs. Similar benefits could be found in the classroom. The picture-text combination can limit possible misunderstanding of the situation by signaling the emotions of the person in the text to the trainee. Additionally, with the use of the graphic novel teaching method, may be able to build empathy skills prior to students reaching their industry occupation. These tools could potentially provide great findings to the use of graphic novels in the classroom. Adding the graphic novel to the academic curriculum may help support the development of empathy in the student by providing a visual and text representation of the emotions that are found in the ethical situation. The graphic novel may provide the emotional experience through the picture/text combination that cannot be found in traditional case study methods. Additionally, the use light nature of graphic novels may be able to train and teach individuals without the heavy word-weighting pressure found in business textbook studies. The comic images provide a less threatening approach to the intricacies of ethical dilemmas.

Empathy is critical for teaching ethics selling skills. Often in the field of sales, building a relationship with the customer leads to higher sales and an improved image for the organization and thus larger evaluations and bonuses for the sales representative. Being able to empathize with the customer is a vital ingredient in this relationship enhancement process. For example, when a salesperson enters into a meeting with the customer, he or she assesses the relevant environment for information and insights to relate to the buyer. Being able to gauge the emotions and feelings of the customer is part of this environmental analysis.

In the classroom, the graphic novel may hold similar benefits to those found in the selling field. If the customer is experiencing financial difficulties, for instance, the salesperson may choose not to aggressively promote purchases by them, but may endeavor to relate to their situation and revisit the customer at a later time to attempt the sales call. This can assist constructing a stronger relationship between the buyer and the seller. Providing students with the ability to empathize with the customer before entering the work force, could set them up for success.

Conclusion

Applying the graphic novel to the classroom may enhance empathy in the students through the picture-text combination. Research in several fields has begun to apply the graphic novel technique as a unique way to connect with students. The comic format can bring heavy topics to the eyes of the reader allowing the students to develop emotional connections with the characters in the graphic novel. Limited research has been conducted on the use of graphic novels in the classroom. However, several theoretical findings in psychology, literacy, neuropsychology and ethics pave the way for applying the medium to the classroom.

Graphic narratives are a medium that has significant potential for marketing education. Future progress should be made in identifying those areas of topical interest that most benefit from skills in perspective taking and encouragement of empathy. The current study takes the perspective of ethic education. Similar research in other areas of business (i.e. financial, accounting or even workplace safety) may find similar benefits in use of graphic novels as an educational tool. From there, we can work to create graphic narratives relevant to the domain and more systematically and empirically investigate the value of such tools in marketing education.

References Available Upon Request

Appendix: (Modified) Information Below



Figure 1: Abstraction Shifts in *Volleyball 911* (Ishikawa and Hayashi 2011)

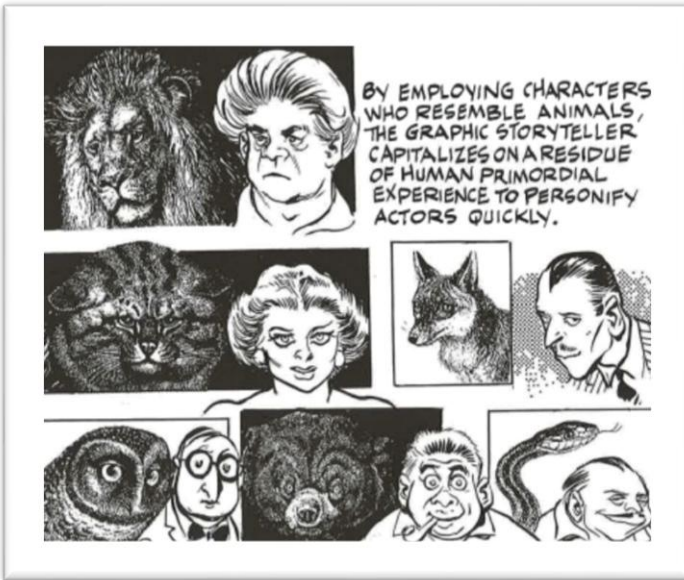


Figure 2. Reproduced from Eisner's *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Artist* (2008, p.14)



Figure 3: Textual Variations for Sound Effects, Reproduced from McCloud's *Making Comics* (2010, p.147)



Figure 4. Reproduced from Daniels Fund Ethics Initiative, Baseball Ticket Scenario (2012, p.4)



Figure 5. Reproduced from Daniels Fund Ethics Initiative, Baseball Ticket Scenario (2012, p.5)