Comics as a method throughout an empirical research process

Lydia.Wysocki@ncl.ac.uk  @lyd_w
ESRC/NEDTC PhD student (part-time) & Research Associate (part-time), School of Education Communication and Language Sciences Newcastle University, UK

Introduction

Making comics is gaining traction as a way to disseminate academic research (examples include: Wysocki 2018, Sousanis 2015). Exploring the use of comics as a method within empirical research takes this further. This poster shares examples from my ongoing PhD research.

Planning

My handwritten notes when reading, thinking, and planning my research strategy typically included both words and pictures. Earlier debunkings of research on learning styles are a reminder not to pathologise this as a sign of a visual learner or other label (Curry 1990). Instead, I see this as a crossover between my dual academic (educational researcher) and practitioner (comics creator) identities.

Recruitment tool

This large four-panel comic was part of my recruitment materials for fieldwork at Thought Bubble Comics Convention in Leeds, UK, 2017. In a busy and noisy event marquee it offered an eye-catching overview of what participation in this stage of research entailed. My intentionally simplistic drawing style prioritises clarity of communication over subjective ideas of artistic beauty (Mendonça 2016). The hand-drawn quality of this comic strip makes evident my personal investment in the research, a technique building on the tradition of self-published zines (self-created magazines) to share views from a range of critical positions; the use of zines in academic work zines is particularly associated with feminist approaches to research (Feigenbaum 2013).

Data collection instrument

My comics-format questionnaire builds on the use of visual methods in research participation (Clark et al. 2013). Still recognisable as a questionnaire, this unassuming data collection instrument is made appropriate to the target population of comics readers in an environment where they would expect to encounter comics. The questionnaire uses images not as supplemental illustrations but as integral to communication through comics as a multimodal medium of interdependent and sequential words and pictures. These advances in multimodal data collection instrument design are however balanced by the potential for miscommunication - as seen in emojis as multimodal language (Miller et al. 2016) - as a reminder that language is not a stable system (Vološinov 1973, p.48). This instrument serves as a stepping stone as I seek to extend a sociocultural understanding of language (Bakhtin and Medvedev [Denith 1995]) to address comics as multimodal and polysemic texts.

Debrief sheet

This debrief sheet in comics form first addressed my ethical obligation to give questionnaire respondents information about their participation in my research. As such it has parallels with the use of comics as a tool within medical consent procedures (Grootens-Wijgers et al. 2015) and emergency response information (Li-Vollmer 2018), where both the clarity and complexity of communication afforded by comics are valued. It also functioned as a recruitment tool for my planned later stage of group interviews. The simplified depiction of imagined (intended) group interviews was a succinct way to give an overview of how further participation in research might look.

British comics, British values? PhD title, focus, research questions, and methods

My prescient research explores how British comics contribute to readers’ constructions of Britishness at a time of heightened focus on national identity.

First research questions: Do British comics 2005-2015 show microaggressions about race? Are these associated with specific ethnic and religious groups?

Second research questions: How do specific British comics 2005-2015 contribute to readers’ constructions of Britishness? What role do constructions of race play in these understandings?

Stage A: cross-referencing unobtrusive measures to identify comics
Stage B: paper questionnaire asking readers what they read
Stage C: content analysis as a quantitative method to code Stage B comics focussing on representations of race and class
Stage D: critical discourse analysis as a detailed qualitative method to further analyse stage C comics

ABC address the first research questions.

Stage E: purposive sampling of Stage B respondents to identify readers as gatekeepers to existing comics reading groups/fraternity groups; group interviews (mediated by tasks) of specific comics.
Stage F: individual debrief interviews

EF address the second research questions.