

Graphic Disruptions: Comics, Disability and De-Canonizing Composition

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Composition can be a normative endeavor, unfriendly to composers who communicate outside of a narrow range of acceptable ways. The goal in a well-written essay is usually to convey a message clearly and efficiently using well-ordered discourse to make a persuasive argument. An effective speaker is assumed to be someone with a clear strong voice who communicates in accepted, neurotypical ways to a receptive audience. Multimodal approaches to composition, while heralded as innovative, can reinforce these normative assumptions. Gunther Kress, for example, describing a sign with separate written and pictorial elements, writes that each of these elements having “distinct potentials for meaning” typifies “the argument for taking ‘multimodality’ as the normal state of human communication” (1). Ascribing normative properties to multimodality, however, marginalizes the potential contributions of a wide range of composers, especially disabled ones.

Disability theorists have challenged assumptions underlying the concept of “normal,” demonstrating that what we think of as normal is socially and culturally constructed (Davis). In rhetoric and composition, theorists interested in disability apply this analysis and related critiques to composing situations, questioning normative impulses and finding new spaces for valuing disabled composers (Brueggemann; Dolmage; Lewiecki-Wilson; McRuer; Price). Recently, composition theorists have applied critiques from disability studies to multimodality, interrogating normative assumptions circulating at the intersection of word, image, sound and space. The authors of the collaborative webtext “Multimodality in Motion,” for example, explain that “multimodality as it is commonly used implies an ableist understanding of the human composer” (Yergeau et al.). They re-examine a normalized understanding of “the rhetorical situation” and explore ways to intervene in the ableist underpinnings of multimodality.

The study of comics is an important part of the project of critiquing normative assumptions underlying multimodality and composition. Extending the efforts of the authors of “Multimodality in Motion,” and their focus on “the” rhetorical situation, I explore how multimodal comics can intervene in normalizing understandings of “the” rhetorical canons. Using examples from several comics that feature disability, I show how disability can productively disrupt normative expectations about the “typical” composition process. Marking these disruptions contributes to the project of destabilizing normative

assumptions of composition and multimodal theories, while also revealing the generative possibilities that disability yields for multimodal composition.

De-Canonizing through Comics

Comics theorist Scott McCloud calls the first step of comics creation “idea/purpose,” identifying this step as including the “content,” “emotion,” and “philosophies” of a work (170). This characterization aligns with the rhetorical process of invention. Traditionally, invention is the canon through which one finds the “available means of persuasion” through a logical process of knowledge creation (Aristotle). As Lisa Ede, Cheryl Glenn, and Andrea Lunsford argue, invention, “the heart and soul of inquiry,” is closely linked to the rhetorical canon of memory, “the very substance of knowledge” (410). This linkage loosely aligns with the comics composition process. McCloud, for example, represents “idea/purpose” generation as the first step in the process, drawing a light bulb in the mind of the comics’ creator, with a dotted line connecting the mind’s content to the material result—the comic book. The comic book is the form the idea takes and constitutes McCloud’s second step in the creative process (172).

Alison Bechdel, in her graphic memoir *Fun Home*, complicates the seamless linkage between invention and memory frequently assumed in both rhetorical theory and comics theory. Bechdel describes an occurrence when she was ten years old in which she experienced an episode of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). Her compulsions revolve around certain literacy practices, including writing in her diary. Bechdel starts by recording the events of her days, but then begins questioning herself, using first the “minutely lettered phrase” and then a symbol for “I think” in between all her sentences, obscuring them (141). Bechdel sprinkles this symbol, a “curvy circumflex,” throughout her journal until her writing becomes “fairly illegible,” a way of documenting the “troubling gap between word and meaning” in her experience (143). She describes this gap as “a sort of epistemological crisis,” doubting whether what she wrote was “objectively true” and wondering if her “simple, declarative sentences” were actually “utter lies” (141).

In rhetorical terms, Bechdel experiences disconnection between invention and memory—she questions her recollection of events and feels unable to record reliably any substance of her knowledge. In McCloud’s terms, she is unable to transmit the ideas in her head to the physical form of the page. Rather than interpreting this disconnect as a failure, however, Bechdel positions it as integral to her narrative. The arc of the memoir, which deals with questions swirling around her father’s possible suicide, negotiates similar instabilities regarding the relationship between knowledge and inquiry. Bechdel can never know absolutely the details of her father’s death, an uncertainty that she pro-

ductively reflects in her own literacy practices. In Ede, Glenn and Lunsford's terms, Bechdel's memoir assumes "the very substance of [her] knowledge" (410) by recording uncertainty that reflects rather than edits out confusion.

In the hybrid graphic-text memoir *The Ride Together*, a memoir of autism in the family, Judy and Paul Karasik also use comics to trouble an assumed seamless connection between invention, memory and delivery, particularly in the context of collaborative composition. Like Bechdel, rather than editing out the messy elements of their composition process, they include them, delivering a product that is not finished or polished but that documents the issues they faced while composing. This form of delivery leads readers to ask crucial questions about representation within the context of autism.

In the final pages of the memoir, Paul, who draws the graphic chapters of the memoir, depicts himself and his sister Judy sharing the latest version of the memoir with David, their brother with autism. Drawing attention to the process of revision, Paul tells David, "I know you saw an earlier version but we've changed parts" (196). After showing David several graphic scenes from the memoir and asking David if he remembers them, Paul asks David to help them finish the memoir with a concluding remark or an update on what he is up to. David demurs and strides away to perform one of his favorite Superman scenes, which he does everyday at 4:30, with Paul looking on. By including this exchange, Paul and Judy draw attention to the fact that they are delivering an incomplete product. Their recollections may differ from David's; their impetus to compose and interest in narrative closure may not be shared by David. By including this scene, they also show their awareness of their own inability to accurately represent David, at least by neurotypical standards. David's closing Superman scene gives him the last word; he is depicted as purposefully initiating his performance, yet readers may not know quite how to interpret this scene, again drawing attention to the challenges and ethics of representation, especially of someone else's cognitive status.

When a composer uses the multimodal format of comics to convey a sense of his or her experience of disability, he or she potentially delivers a new way of thinking about, expressing, and sharing that experience. The multimodal composition process reaches into every aspect of creation—invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. When Bechdel reproduces on the page the words, symbols, and images of her experience with OCD, she delivers an approach to multimodality not as representative of a "normal" way of communicating by a "normal" composer, but instead explores alternative ways that disability enlivens her approach to composition. When the Karasiks draw attention to the representational challenges of depicting David, they ask crucial questions about how multimodality can or cannot communicate non-normative expression. Bechdel and the Karasiks join a wide range of others who

use multimodal comics to explore disability in new ways (B.; Forney; Leavitt; Small). This diverse use of comics by disabled people and those close to them reveals the possibilities that delivery and disability possess for destabilizing and transforming the entire composition experience

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