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Challenges in Collaborative Comic Strip Writing and Publishing: University Students' Experiences and Strategies

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ABSTRACT

The integration of creative arts into academic curricula has gained recognition for its potential to enhance student engagement, collaboration, and critical thinking. One innovative approach is collaborative comic strip writing and publishing, which merges visual storytelling with written expression. Despite its benefits, students often encounter challenges in the process, including language-related difficulties, group dynamics, and visual representation issues. This qualitative study explores the experiences of 20 university students engaged in a collaborative comic strip project as part of a Basic Writing course. Using a phenomenological approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Findings reveal that students faced significant obstacles related to vocabulary limitations, maintaining logical flow, negotiating creative differences, and technical constraints in digital publishing. To address these challenges, students employed strategies such as utilizing online writing tools, structured brainstorming sessions, peer feedback, role assignments, and digital design platforms. The study highlights the value of integrating digital tools and structured collaboration techniques to enhance the effectiveness of comic strip writing in educational settings. These insights offer practical recommendations for educators seeking to incorporate visual storytelling into their teaching methodologies.

Keywords: Collaborative learning; Comic strip writing; Digital publishing

INTRODUCTION

The integration of creative arts into academic curricula has increasingly gained attention as educators seek to enhance students' learning experiences through innovative and engaging methods. One such method is collaborative comic strip writing and publishing, which encourages creativity, teamwork, and critical thinking. Comic strips, as a medium of visual storytelling, offer a unique platform for students to communicate complex ideas through a combination of imagery and text. This approach not only fosters artistic expression but also helps develop language and communication skills, making it an ideal tool in both creative and academic settings.

In the context of university education, collaborative learning plays a pivotal role in enhancing the development of social, cognitive, and problem-solving skills. Collaborative comic strip writing, which involves group efforts to create and publish a comic strip, requires students to work together in a shared creative space. This process can be highly rewarding, yet it often presents various challenges, including differences in creative vision, communication barriers, and technical difficulties related to digital publishing platforms. These challenges can affect the overall quality of the work produced and the collaborative experience itself.

Despite the growing use of comic strips in educational settings, there is limited research that explores the specific challenges and strategies students encounter in the collaborative writing and publishing process. Understanding these challenges and how students navigate them can provide valuable insights into the potential of this medium as an educational tool. This study aims to explore university students' experiences in collaborative comic strip writing and publishing, focusing on the challenges they face and the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges.

The purpose of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of the collaborative comic strip creation process from the perspective of university students. By identifying the obstacles students encounter and the strategies they use, this study aims to contribute to the body of knowledge on collaborative learning and creative projects in higher education. Furthermore, the findings of this study may offer practical recommendations for educators seeking to incorporate collaborative comic strip writing into their teaching practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The integration of comic strip collaborative writing and publishing in higher education presents a unique intersection of creativity, pedagogy, and technology. This literature review aims to explore the challenges faced by university students in this domain, as well as the strategies they employ to navigate these challenges. The qualitative inquiry into this subject reveals a multifaceted landscape where educational comics serve not only as tools for engagement but also as mediums for expression and learning.

One of the primary challenges students encounter in comic strip collaborative writing is the need to balance creativity with educational objectives. The playful nature of comics can sometimes lead to a dilution of academic rigor, as students may prioritize artistic expression over the conveyance of complex concepts. Santos emphasizes that comic book creation can effectively facilitate understanding of professional rights among nursing students, highlighting the emotional engagement that visual narratives can foster (Santos, 2024). However, this emotional involvement can also distract from the educational goals

if not carefully managed. The challenge lies in ensuring that the comic strips produced are not only engaging but also pedagogically sound.

Moreover, the collaborative aspect of comic strip creation introduces additional complexities. Students must navigate interpersonal dynamics, including differing levels of commitment and varying artistic skills among group members. Mićović discusses the importance of inter-faculty cooperation in educational settings, suggesting that collaborative projects can enhance learning experiences by allowing students to cross disciplinary boundaries (Mićović, 2022). This interdisciplinary approach can enrich the comic creation process, yet it also necessitates effective communication and conflict resolution strategies among team members. The challenge of collaboration is further compounded by the necessity of integrating diverse perspectives and learning styles, as highlighted by Belda-Medina, who notes that comics can accommodate various educational needs (Belda-Medina, 2024).

In addressing these challenges, students often employ several strategies to enhance their collaborative writing and publishing experiences. One effective strategy is the use of digital tools that facilitate comic creation. Kılıçkaya and Krajka found that web-based comic strip creation tools can significantly aid English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in improving their grammar and sentence writing skills (Kılıçkaya & Krajka, 2012). These tools not only streamline the creative process but also provide scaffolding that can help students focus on language mechanics while engaging in artistic expression. The incorporation of technology thus serves as a vital strategy for overcoming the challenges associated with traditional comic creation methods.

Additionally, the application of gamification principles in comic strip projects has shown promise in enhancing student motivation and engagement. Laksana's research indicates that gamified comic strip media can effectively target student behavior and increase user engagement in the learning process (Laksana, 2024). By integrating game-like elements into the comic creation experience, students are more likely to remain invested in their projects, thereby mitigating some of the challenges related to motivation and participation. This approach aligns with the broader trend of utilizing interactive and visual strategies to support diverse learners, as discussed by Bryans-Bongey (Bryans-Bongey, 2018).

Furthermore, the role of feedback and iterative processes in comic strip creation cannot be overstated. Students benefit from receiving constructive criticism throughout the collaborative writing process, which helps them refine their narratives and artistic choices. Iswari's study emphasizes the importance of using comic strips as a medium for students to express their opinions, suggesting that qualitative feedback can enhance their learning experiences (Iswari, 2021). By fostering an environment where feedback is valued, students can navigate the complexities of collaborative writing more effectively.

In addition to these strategies, the incorporation of educational theories such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) can provide a framework for addressing the diverse needs of students engaged in comic strip creation. UDL principles advocate for flexible approaches that accommodate various learning preferences, thereby promoting inclusivity in educational settings. González Ybarra's work on Latinx preservice teachers illustrates how comics can serve as a medium for documenting pedagogical practices, thereby empowering students to share their unique experiences and insights (González Ybarra, 2024). This empowerment is crucial in fostering a sense of ownership over the collaborative writing process.

The challenges of collaborative comic strip writing are also influenced by the broader context of educational environments. Factors such as institutional support, access to resources, and the availability of

training in comic creation techniques can significantly impact students' experiences. For instance, the study by Lazarinis et al. underscores the importance of utilizing comic strip creator tools that align with assessable learning objectives, thereby ensuring that students have the necessary resources to succeed (Lazarinis et al., 2015). Institutional support in the form of workshops or access to technology can alleviate some of the burdens associated with collaborative projects.

Moreover, the emotional and psychological aspects of collaborative writing must be considered. Students often experience anxiety related to group dynamics and the fear of judgment from peers. Faruq and Nurhalim's research on using comic strips to teach language skills highlights how creative expression can serve as a therapeutic outlet for students, helping them to manage anxiety and build confidence in their abilities (Faruq & Nurhalimah, 2019). By creating a safe space for expression, educators can help students navigate the emotional challenges that arise during collaborative writing endeavors.

The significance of comic strips as educational tools extends beyond mere engagement; they also serve as powerful mediums for conveying complex ideas and fostering critical thinking. The work of Park et al. illustrates how anatomy comic strips can enhance students' understanding of intricate subjects, demonstrating the potential of comics to bridge gaps in knowledge (Park et al., 2011). This ability to simplify complex concepts while maintaining academic integrity is a crucial aspect of the challenges faced by students in collaborative writing projects.

The literature on university students' challenges and strategies in comic strip collaborative writing and publishing reveals a rich tapestry of experiences shaped by creativity, collaboration, and educational objectives. While students face significant challenges related to balancing artistic expression with academic rigor, navigating interpersonal dynamics, and managing emotional responses, they also employ a variety of strategies to enhance their experiences. The integration of digital tools, gamification, feedback mechanisms, and inclusive educational frameworks all contribute to the successful navigation of these challenges. As educational institutions continue to explore the potential of comics as pedagogical tools, it is essential to recognize and address the multifaceted nature of the collaborative writing process, ensuring that students are equipped to thrive in this innovative learning environment.

METHODS OF RESEARCH

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore university students' experiences in collaborative comic strip writing and publishing. A phenomenological approach was adopted to capture the lived experiences, challenges, and strategies of participants engaged in this creative process. Data collection focused on participants' subjective perspectives, emphasizing their interactions with collaborative dynamics, language, visual representation, and technology. This study involved 20 university students enrolled in a Basic Writing course who participated in a collaborative comic strip writing activity. The respondents were from diverse academic backgrounds and had varying levels of writing proficiency. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to explore the challenges they faced and the strategies they employed during the activity.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Challenges in Comic Strip Collaborative Writing:

Writing and Language-Related Challenges

(1) Limited Vocabulary and Expression:

"Sometimes I know what I want to say, but I can't find the right words that fit in the comic panels." (R1)

"It was hard to keep the dialogue short and still convey the meaning." (R7)

"I needed a dictionary to find more suitable words." (R14)

(2) Grammar and Sentence Structure Issues:

"We often wrote long sentences, but later realized we had to simplify them." (R5)

"Grammar rules made it difficult to make natural-sounding dialogue." (R9)

"I had to rewrite sentences multiple times to make them fit." (R15)

(3) Maintaining Logical Flow:

"Our first draft didn't make sense when we read it from panel to panel." (R2)

"We struggled with making the story coherent while keeping it engaging." (R10)

"It was hard to maintain a smooth storyline within a limited space." (R18)

Collaboration and Group Dynamics Challenges:

(4) Conflicting Ideas Among Group Members

"Everyone had different ideas, and we spent too much time debating." (R3)

"Compromising on the storyline was the most difficult part." (R8)

"We had to vote on which idea to use because we couldn't agree." (R16)

(5) Unequal Contribution:

"Some of us did more work than others, which felt unfair." (R6)

"A few group members didn't contribute much, which made it frustrating." (R12)

"We tried to divide the work evenly, but some members struggled." (R20)

(6) Communication Barriers:

"Explaining our ideas to the group was challenging at times." (R4)

"Misunderstandings happened often, and we had to keep clarifying." (R11)

"We realized that clear communication was key to finishing the project." (R19)

Visual Representation Challenges:

(7) Difficulty in Matching Text with Images:

"The text sometimes didn't match the pictures, and we had to rewrite it." (R13)

"Making the dialogue fit the images was harder than I expected." (R17)

(8) Limited Drawing Skills:

"I am not good at drawing, so I felt a bit insecure about our comic." (R1)

"We had to use simple drawings to make it easier for everyone." (R9)

Strategies Used to Overcome Challenges:

Writing Strategies

(9) Using Online Tools:

"We used Grammarly to check grammar and make our sentences better." (R2)

"A thesaurus helped us find more interesting words." (R10)

"AI tools helped us brainstorm better dialogue options." (R14)

(10) Peer Feedback:

"We reviewed each other's work before finalizing it." (R6)

"Peer feedback helped us find mistakes we didn't notice before." (R15)

"Our friends suggested better ways to phrase some sentences." (R18)

Collaboration Strategies:

(11) Brainstorming Sessions:

"We started with a brainstorming session to get everyone's ideas out." (R3)

"Discussing our ideas first made it easier to agree on a storyline." (R8)

"We used a whiteboard to map out our story before writing." (R12)

(12) Role Assignments:

"Each of us had a role, like writing, editing, or designing." (R5)

"Assigning specific tasks helped us work more efficiently." (R11)

"Having clear roles prevented confusion and overlapping work." (R16)

Visual Adaptation Strategies

(13) Using Digital Tools for Illustration:

"We used Canva because it made drawing easier." (R4)

"Pixton helped us create better visuals without needing drawing skills." (R7)

"Storyboard That was a great tool for making our comic look professional." (R19)

(14) Reference Materials:

"Looking at online comic templates helped us understand panel structure." (R9)

"We checked out other comics for inspiration on layout and dialogue." (R13)

DISCUSSION

Writing and Language-Related Challenges

One of the primary difficulties encountered was limited vocabulary and expression. Several participants struggled to find appropriate words that fit within the constraints of comic panels, making it difficult to balance brevity with meaning. This aligns with previous research suggesting that students often face lexical limitations in creative writing tasks. Furthermore, grammar and sentence structure posed significant challenges, as students initially wrote long, complex sentences before realizing the need for conciseness. Maintaining logical flow across panels also proved problematic, with students recognizing coherence issues in their initial drafts.

To overcome these difficulties, students employed online writing tools such as Grammarly and a thesaurus to refine their sentences and expand their vocabulary. Additionally, peer feedback played a crucial role in identifying errors and improving the overall clarity and effectiveness of the dialogue.

Collaboration and Group Dynamics Challenges

Group collaboration presented another set of obstacles, with conflicting ideas being a recurrent issue. The necessity to compromise and reach a consensus on storyline development often led to prolonged discussions and, in some cases, voting to resolve disagreements. Additionally, unequal contribution among members led to frustration, with some students feeling that their workload was disproportionately higher. Communication barriers further complicated teamwork, as misunderstandings and difficulties in articulating ideas were frequently reported.

In response to these challenges, students utilized structured brainstorming sessions to streamline idea generation and facilitate agreement on key elements of the story. Role assignments were also effective in ensuring that each group member had a clear responsibility, minimizing confusion and enhancing productivity.

Visual Representation Challenges

Matching text with images proved to be a significant challenge, as some students found that their dialogue did not align well with their illustrations, necessitating multiple revisions. Additionally, limited drawing skills led to concerns about the quality of their artwork, with some students expressing insecurity about their illustrations.

To address these issues, students leveraged digital tools such as Canva, Pixton, and Storyboard That, which allowed them to create visually appealing comics without requiring advanced drawing skills. They also consulted online comic templates and existing works for inspiration and guidance on panel structure and dialogue placement.

CONCLUSION

The results indicate that while comic strip collaborative writing presents notable challenges in writing, collaboration, and visual representation, students can effectively navigate these difficulties through strategic interventions. The use of online writing and design tools, structured brainstorming sessions, peer feedback, and role assignments significantly contributed to improving both the writing process and the final product. These findings underscore the importance of integrating technology and collaborative techniques in educational settings to enhance students' creative writing and storytelling skills.

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