Articulating Ideas and Meaning Through the Use of Comics

Nick Sousanis

Abstract

In this interview with author and educator Nick Sousanis, he discusses his PhD dissertation, which was written and drawn entirely in comic book form and later published by Harvard University Press under the title "Unflattening." He describes how he proceeded with the idea of producing a dissertation in comic form and the support he received from his professors. He strongly believes that it is possible to convey complex ideas in comic form and that the form itself draws people in. He also shares what he learns from his students—often non-drawers—and gives examples of innovative work produced by them.

Can you describe the events in your life in which you developed your talent for visual art, more specifically as a comics artist?

I was into comics as a very small child. My much older brother read comics to me; "Batman" ended up being my first word as a result. I liked drawing comics, I liked making all kinds of paper constructions as a little kid. And I made my own comic through junior high and high school, that I created, printed, and sold called "Lockerman" (who makes a small cameo in "Unflattening"). When I came to university, I was still interested in drawing comics, but comics was not something you could do as a field of study and I wanted to do intellectual things—and comics certainly wasn't something you could do as an intellectual. I studied mathematics and philosophy, and although I was still making comics, they were more or less in the background for some time.

After college, I eventually ended up in a Masters program at Wayne State University in Detroit, and in that period my brother and I started a magazine about art and culture called thedetroiter.com—where, among other things, I wrote multiple reviews weekly about arts in the city. In the midst of that I was asked to be in a political art show around the 2004 election. With only a few days to go before the show I turned to making comics. These political comics I made triggered my full-on return to creating comics. (Not that there was ever a full stop, but there was a lot of unfinished work for five to 10 years in there.) Shortly after making those comics, I co-organized an exhibition of art and games and my friend suggested I do the exhibition essay as a comic. So I did this long-form comic about the history of games, how they work, and ultimately a philosophical look at games and life. This was one of the things that when I decided I was going to go to doctoral school, I said, "This is the kind of work I can make that can be educational, very sophisticated, complex, and dense, but doesn't seem like it." Comics are somewhat subversive in that way. You can hand somebody a comic book and they'll read it, expecting something light. But you can so densely pack it in the way you use images, metaphorical images, image and text interactions, that, all of a sudden, they're engrossed in something much deeper than they ever expected to be, and it hasn't turned them away. So that's sort of how I came to it.

I did study fine arts in my Masters program, and I wrote about the arts. And while I really liked the fine arts—and I still do—what I loved about comic books is that you could make something that was reproducible, distributable, and cheap. I give away lots of miniature excerpts of my work to anyone I end up talking with. Beats a business card, and people appreciate it. In that way, you can reach a lot of people. Whereas if I made a painting, only one person could own it and it would cost more money than I could ever pay for it for me to be able to make it worth my time to make.

You very successfully produced a visual rendering of comics art in your wonderful book "Unflattening," which was your dissertation for your PhD. Can you discuss how you made this happen and how you were supported and/or challenged by academia along the way?

None of my advisors knew anything about comics: they were interested enough, curious enough, and I think really somewhat just interested in seeing something that was not the same thing they'd seen their whole career. I had very senior professors. In English Education I had Professor Ruth Vinz, who worked in poetry. I had Robbie McClintock who moved from history of education to technology and education, who was emeritus by the time I finished and really always interested in things that were different than what education had been. And then finally, I had Maxine Greene, who needs probably less introduction, philosopher of aesthetic education. While she didn't know anything about comics, she was really excited about the possibilities in how they realized her own philosophy of making meaning through the visual.

Were there any challenges that you experienced?

I was fortunate, I believe, because of their senior and emeritus status, they weren't risking anything by supporting me. I think the fact that I came in with the plan already—not that I knew exactly what I was going to do—but I knew I was going to work in this form. I wasn't a dabbler in it. This was something I was already an experienced practitioner of and further dedicated myself to as soon as I got to school. And I'll say this just as a side note before I continue: it was important to me that my work was as accepted by the comics world, as it was by academia. I think the bar for drawing good comics is kind of low in academia, and the bar for drawing good comics in the comics world is obviously much higher. It really mattered to me to make connections in the comics world to inform my practice, the sort of feedback about the form and craft that I didn't expect to get in academia. I think to me that's a really important thing about doing alternative kind of scholarship is to be as well-versed in the medium that you're using—or the form you're using—as you are on the research side of it. And striking that balance really fuelled mine. The third thing that helped me was not only didn't I know any better, but I was really stubborn: I was just going to do this thing. I was little bit older as a grad student and wasn't doubting it. I was just plunging ahead doing it. From there, I became a bit of an evangelist for this work (and still am), speaking at conferences very early into my program about why this work mattered. On the average, people were very receptive—and there was a lot of enthusiasm early on (particularly from the Digital Humanities folks) that ended up generating a lot of interest and attention to the work before I'd really even gotten going on the dissertation.

As far as people pushing back, I can recall an AERA talk … a professor had sort of an odd comment: "If you're so anti the academy, why do you want to be a part of it?" Which I thought … number one I don't think I was particularly anti academy at all and two, it didn't make a whole lot of sense, because the point is you can love being part of something, but also say, "there are ways that it can grow or expand or change." This sort of thing was disturbing but mostly emboldened me to push harder. My advisors approached it like: "Let's see what happens." At some point I had achieved so much momentum for the project, with broad interest in the work from multiple directions … there was no reason to get in the way of it had they even wanted to. Some of my cohort—they were all supportive in general—but I think a few were a little more cautious: "Are you really going to do this?" I'm not sure what their concerns were exactly … but I did feel that.

Overall, I think I was really very fortunate. I think I hit the right time in history where people were open to it. And I just happened to have the right set of mentors, the right set of skills, and the right set of ignorance about what I wasn't supposed to do that it just kind of sailed through a lot easier than it could have.

Where have you gone with this now that you're in academia and where are you planning to go with it?

I'm very grateful for the success of this work and to see it spread into so many different educational settings in the US and abroad, and that I've had the opportunity to speak about it with so many different people. But at the same time, it's the first long-form work I've ever made—I feel like I'm kind of just getting started. I'm really excited to push boundaries on that.

I've learned so much from my students. I've been fortunate since I was a student at Columbia to teach classes there to primarily self-described non-drawers, and to continue in a post-doc at University of Calgary where I taught classes to mostly non-drawers, and now at San Francisco State, where I launched a Comic Studies minor.

I do have some classes that have a fair amount of animators and drawing students in them, but the majority of my students still have no prior experience. My goal in class is to get everybody to understand how much they actually can communicate visually and how much they already know about drawing because they're visual creatures who are spatially embodied and live in the world. All the times that I work with them I learn better about how to start from that place, and I think the more I learn from doing that with them, the more I trust it and, hopefully, the more I can trust it in my own work.

In "Unflattening" there's an argument for why the visual should count. The next work that I'm slowly in the midst of is a little deeper look at how we do make meaning through the visual and how much the body itself—how much our movement … the fact the way we have fingers … and the ways our eyes work, and all those sorts of things—how that is part of our thinking. You can use that to think about what schools maybe could look like, or what education could look like in a different way. You think about the body being really vital to learning, rather than incidental to it.

To this end, I've teamed up with my friend Andrea Kantrowitz, who is a drawing researcher, and another colleague, Kathryn Ricketts, who is a dance professor, and we have done two workshop-performances together so far, where we weave together our different modes of making meaning. We start with a performance where drawing responds to dancer, and vice versa, which segues into a workshop where we move between dance, drawing, and comics to get participants quickly engaged in exploring these forms (http://spinweaveandcut.com/new-scholarship-pmla-comic/), and it's been really fascinating.

If we believe that viewing and portraying work provide a different and important way of thinking and understanding, what suggestions do you have for elementary and secondary school teachers in order to support visual literacies?

The second or third time I taught my Comics in Education course at Columbia, the texts that we used didn't come in until three or four weeks later into the semester than they were supposed to. So, we did all sorts of comic-making exercises right upfront at the beginning part of the class. I started to apologize to the students and say, "Sorry, we haven't really learned anyth…", and I stopped myself. And I realized instead that, in fact, all the things we had been doing had taught us so much, one, about how much we already knew, two, about how to do these things, and, three, about the theories that we were going to talk about. I had been giving them constraint-based exercises and all kinds of things to get them making. Just to give you one example, tell me "How you got here?" (which you can interpret in many different ways) in a comic strip of three panels and a version of it across two pages. And so, everybody goes home and does their thing, and they'd come back and compare the choices they had made individually in the three panels versus the two pages. And then, we'd be looking and learning from all the different ways each student had approached it. And, in fact, they had taught themselves an enormous amount. That still stands out to me. Here we were doing all these things that felt like play, but they were teaching themselves important, lasting lessons as a result.

And I think even those of us who are in the arts or think about play as important, there is still a part of us that will downplay it because, "it's fun; it's sort of trying things." And, yet, I think the more you learn to embrace that and make that the front part of what you do, the more it can inform your work as a whole, and how it can point you in directions for new discoveries.

I do get this question a lot: "I agree with you that makes sense, but I'm not a maker, so how can I be the one leading it?" I think part of that is the sort of the trust that your students will figure it out. That doesn't mean you should be ignorant about what you're going into, but it does mean trying things knowing that some might fail, trying things knowing that if they're into it if you set up situations in an environment where they're excited to play and to try, they will start teaching themselves, and you, at the same time. I think being open to that and trusting that play really is serious learning is the key.

What advice would you give to graduate students and/or supervisors about pursuing visual modes of inquiry in their work?

I think what I said a little bit earlier about seeking out comic makers when I was doing my work was as important as the advice I was getting in the academy, I think that is really key. You don't want to be a

dabbler in it—not that there's anything wrong with being a dabbler, but if you're going to make this kind of work, you want to understand the form you're working in as well as the research you're bringing to it. Without doing that, I find that that work tends to be more like illustration: "Here are some great ideas I had, and I stuck some pictures with it." I think really immersing yourself in the ways of the form is key, and that often means seeking outsiders—maybe within your university, maybe not. But I think it's absolutely worth it.

In my case I definitely started making comics as academic work because of accessibility. I was really interested in the ways I could make complex ideas accessible to a broader audience without dumbing them down. In fact, in comics I was maybe making denser work than I would have made in text alone. But I learned something more in the course of making the work … People frequently ask me this question: "Did you come up with the words first or the pictures?" And I say, "Yes!" And it's really this back and forth between images teaching me things that I want to write, words teaching me things or suggesting things I want to draw, images suggesting directions that I'd go in my research that I wouldn't do otherwise because I have to solve problems in the image. There are things that the images suggest that I wasn't thinking about or things in my sketches that make me think of something I would never have thought of. So while the work started about making ideas accessible, ultimately working visually changed what I came up with in my work. Had I written the text for this and then drawn it afterward, it would be a completely different thing. Instead, with the way I work, which is starting with sketches, starting with images. I think that's a prime lesson of this: it's not about making it easier, it's not about making it aesthetically different; it's really about changing how you think, or the ways you do your thinking, from the ground up. And the thing I do with my students—who tend to be not trained artists—whatever skills they come with, they all end up figuring out ways to make meaning, and sort of *surprise* themselves. I think that's a really key word: they surprise themselves in how they can articulate ideas and meaning through the use of the visual—and I don't mean the use of the visual as about specific skills or training, but as a way of spatially organizing information or marks to create meaning. And I really see that everybody can do that, and it definitely changes what you can do and the kinds of questions you can ask, and how often you can surprise yourself.

Do you have one example of a student that you came across that really just—by playing and doing these kinds of exercises—transformed what they were doing?

Many. One student in particular who demonstrates this well was a student in my class called "Comics as a Way of Thinking" in the English department at the University of Calgary where I was a post-doc. She was super shy. It was a smallish class, 18 students, and I could get her to say one sentence each class. She was really interested in comics but had zero drawing experience—everything she made was sort of stick figure, smiley face, level of craft. But she kept doing these curious things in the way she used the space of a page in the comics. Without going into the specifics about comics that much, comics are both this thing where you draw sequential serial images, but you also are thinking about the architecture of the whole page at the same time. So, there's sort of a back and forth between those things. And she was really using that "whole" in an interesting way and she produced this piece for her final that moved me so much I have since shared it in all of my public talks. While it's hard to explain without seeing it, I'll say that this apparently it started from her just playing with some words and some pictures about herself and from that, these repressed thoughts about being bullied and picked on in high school came out.

The final piece turned into this really powerful and affirming statement about who she is. She still drew a stick figure version of herself, but even with that she used the form quite innovatively. There's a lot of play obscuring her character's face until the end, she does a ton with comics panels as boxes, sometimes as a window that you see through, but also as obstacles blocking her. There was a lot of play with those sorts of things and then the high point: as she's talking about her being trapped and constrained in these boxes, she moves to a page of only words, but words that read in this sharp-angled spiral that moves through the page as you read through it as her words talk about no longer constrained by boxes. It never stands out like she's mastered some sort of Rembrandt-ish skills of art, but it's this powerhouse of how using the visual and using the space in a way she did could showcase or could open spaces for thinking in different and really profound ways, and it's produced in a way that can be shared easily with others. The way she moves the reader through space and played with the very way we read, turns this into an incredibly moving piece. http://spinweaveandcut.com/education-odessa/.

One more example, a student from a class a year or two ago—again, not a trained drawer at all. In class, we read comics and learned a bit about graphic medicine, comics that deal with health in visual form. He made a comic about his grandmother who had died of Alzheimer's, and he really never knew her when she was healthy. He explored his understanding of her and her vanishing memory with things like blank panels—some to talk about not knowing his grandmother and others about her no longer knowing who she was. It was done with the most minimal amount of drawing, but even the blank panels became powerful statements in the way he'd orchestrated it all.

Nick Sousanis is an Eisner-winning comics author and an Assistant Professor of Humanities & Liberal Studies at San Francisco State University, where he is starting a Comics Studies program. He received his doctorate in education at Teachers College, Columbia University in 2014, where he wrote and drew his dissertation entirely in comic book form. Titled "Unflattening," it argues for the importance of visual thinking in teaching and learning, and was published by Harvard University Press in 2015. Unflattening received the 2016 American Publishers Awards for Professional and Scholarly Excellence (PROSE Award) in Humanities, the Lynd Ward Prize for best Graphic Novel of 2015, and was nominated for an Eisner Award for Best Scholarly/Academic work. To date, Unflattening has been translated into French, Korean, Portuguese, Serbian, Polish, Italian, and Chinese.