

Using Survivor Testimony to create comics--a story in drawings

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Lindsey Mutschler teaches Humanities and Art at Lake Washington Girls Middle School, and has fallen in love with the intersection between humanities and visual arts education. A graduate of Western Washington University, she studied secondary art education and is a practicing mixed-media artist. She was an Alfred Lerner Fellow for the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous in 2011 and currently serves on the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center's Advisory Committee. Human rights provide the framework for all of Lindsey's Humanities curriculum, and she believes Holocaust and genocide education underscore everything that is taught in a social justice framework.

comics: *Images juxtaposed in deliberate sequence in order to convey an idea and/or aesthetic response.*
- Scott McCloud

Lesson can be adapted for grades 5-12

RATIONALE

This activity will prompt students to engage with online testimony of Holocaust survivors and pictorial artifacts. Through studying the primary source documents available on the website, students will identify key elements of survivor testimony and create a comic to illustrate a "small moment" from a testimony. Students will learn about history, writing, editing, design, and teamwork all at the same time through the creation of their comic.

Why comics? Comics convey stories in a way that fully engage students like no other media. In the article *The Use of Comics in Holocaust Education*, researcher Robert G. Weiner is quoted as saying, "With the sequential art format you are engaged with both sides of the brain, by interpreting the visual with the right brain and the narrative with the left."¹

OBJECTIVES

- Students will identify key elements of survivor testimony.
- Students will analyze primary source documents, including photographs and oral testimony.
- Students will create an original one-page comic which reflects survivor testimony.
- Students will examine concepts and themes present in survivor testimony.
- Students will follow story beginnings and endings, plot, characters, time and setting, and

¹ <http://today.ttu.edu/2011/03/the-use-of-comics-in-holocaust-education/#>

sequencing.

REQUIREMENTS

Materials:

- Access to internet and WSHERC website
 - 11"x14" card stock or bristol paper, pencils, erasers, drawing pens or thin sharpies, black india ink, small brushes, rulers*
 - Copies of handouts: "Comics Terminology" and "Critique talking points" from www.teachingcomics.org
 - Copies of "Storyboard Templates" handout
- *Or, access to ComicLife or ComicCreator software if creating digital comics

Time: Three to four 45-minute class sessions.

TECHNIQUES AND SKILLS

Large-group discussion, small-group work, interpreting visual history testimony, brainstorming, reading for comprehension and information, analyzing primary source materials, drafting out storyboards, editing text and drawings, critiquing finished work.

PROCEDURES

Step 1: Students view online testimony and accompanying documents.

In small groups of 3-5, students should explore the testimony, timeline, and photographs of each of the survivors documented online. Teacher might also assign each group a specific survivor. As they explore, students should pay particular attention in order to identify a "small moment" to zoom in on and explore further in their comic.

Step 2: Discuss key moments and themes.

After students have explored the online content, facilitate a whole-class discussion. *What similarities did you find between each of the voices online? What were some of the differences? Why do you think each particular memory stood out most for the survivor? How would you describe the **tone** of each story? How did the accompanying photographs, map, and timeline add to your understanding of the testimony?*

Step 3: Outline storyboard.

Each group should agree on a small moment or aspect of a testimony to make into a one-page comic illustration. *How many panels are needed to communicate this moment/story? What size will each panel be? (See attached handout for different standard panel layouts.) What text, dialogue, or captions will go in each panel?* This can be done as an individual activity, or with the panels divided between each group member and brought together as one finished product.

Step 4: Research online

Groups should seek additional primary source photos of ghettos, camps, and other locations or details relevant to the online testimony. These photos can be printed and used as source images for the panel drawings, or saved and used directly if making digital comics. If directly using the photographs in digital comics, students should choose photographs that are available for free-use. Encourage students to use the photographs and maps available on the WSHERC testimony pages and properly attribute the source in their comic. Here is another great source of archival images: Gallery of Holocaust Images <http://fcit.usf.edu/holocaust/resource/gallery/gallery.htm>

Step 5: Create comic

1. *Write script.* Students should outline what will be said in dialogue or captions for each panel.
2. *Sketch panels in pencil.* After panel layout is selected, students should determine what images will correspond with the text for each panel. Consider using a variety of long-shots, medium-shots, and close-up shots. (See attached "Comics Terminology" handout)
3. *Add text/captions.* Draw in speech and thought balloons, as well as captions. Carefully pencil in the text.
4. *Ink panels and text.* When draft is complete in pencil, ink over panels, letters, and images with fine art pens/ thin sharpies and india ink.

Step 6: Critique final comics.

Use the handout "Critique talking points" and adapt as necessary:

Talk about the Story. *Is the survivor testimony clearly communicated? Is his/her voice in tact? Is the story true and factual to the testimony? Has the student zoomed in a relevant "small moment"?*

Talk about the Timing.

Talk about the Art. *How appropriate is the art to the story? What panel(s) are most successful? Why? How well integrated are the drawings and the words? Can they exist apart or are they interdependent?*

Talk about the Writing. *Is the dialogue/text well-written? Do characters have distinct voices? Are descriptions/captions well-chosen, or do they repeat what's in the drawing?*

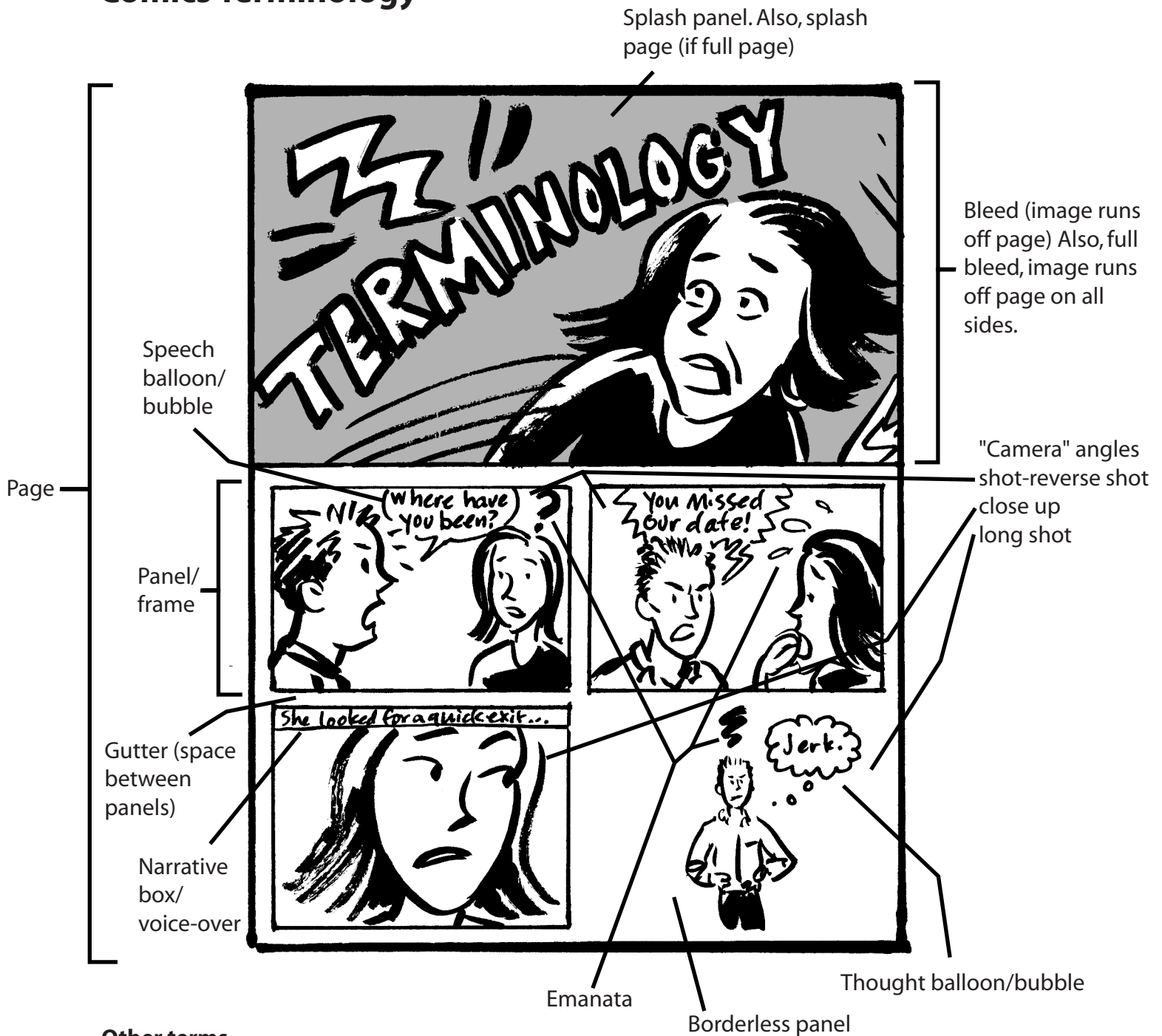
Modifications and adaptations:

- Comics can be adapted as individual or group projects
- As an precursor to this activity, students can view and discuss sections from *Maus*, by Art Spiegelman. Discuss how Spiegelman conveys his story through drawings. How does he capture "small moments"? How does the comic medium complicate or simplify his narrative?
- As a shorter activity, students can create the comic digitally using software such as Comic Life or Comic Creator. If using online photographs to create digital comics, it's important to teach students about using free-source images or properly attributing images to their original source. An easy way to include this information is to use a "caption" to position the citation at the bottom of the panel.

Other helpful resources on teaching comics:

- *Drawing Words & Writing Pictures* by Jessical Abel and Matt Madden (online companion resource at: www.dw-wp.com)
- *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud
- The Graphic Classroom - www.thegraphicclassroom.org
- Example of middle school students at KIPP Academy who created the online comic *Dark Memories: The Story of the Holocaust*:
http://www.ezcomics.com/site/sites/all/themes/ezcomics_new/view_comics.php?email=&viewid=84

Comics Terminology



Other terms

Spread: two facing pages in a printed book

Recto/verso: technical terms for pages in a spread. Recto = right page, verso = left page

Printer's spread: the layout of pages for printing. Not the same as a spread in a printed book.

Thumbnail: a rough sketch of a comic, delineating placement of figures, word balloons, and background elements, as well as content of word balloons.

Pencil: a relatively defined drawing preliminary to the final inked stage.

Inks: the final stage of a comics drawing (applying ink to the pencil guidelines)

Mockup: a rough layout of pages to plan a book

Paste-up: the final artwork pages ready for printing

Indicia: important copyright and other legal information printed in a book, usually at the beginning.

This document is free for non-commercial educational use.

See <http://www.teachingcomics.org/copy.php> for complete copyright information.

Critique talking points:

Try to look clearly at your colleagues' work, and articulate what they need to work on, and what they do well.

Talk about the story:

Is there a 3-act structure? Who is the main character and what is his/her motivating desire or need? How is that need addressed? How is the story resolved? Do you think that the author has made the story compelling? How? Did you find it satisfying? Why or why not?

Talk about the timing:

Did the story fit the length? (i.e., did it feel cramped or overlong?) Where should the story be compressed or lengthened? Was closure used in an interesting way at any particular point?

Talk about the art:

How appropriate is the art to the story? What panel(s) did you like the best? Why? Choose a panel that needs work. What would you suggest? How is the lettering? What do you think about the author's choices in terms of inking? How well integrated are the drawings and the words? Can they exist apart, or are they interdependent? Look for a place where drawing takes the place of words.

Talk about the writing:

Is the dialogue well-written? Do the characters have individual, distinctive voices? Are descriptions well chosen, or do they repeat what is visible in the drawing?

If you can think of any overall observations, or directions this artist might take comics, try to formulate those ideas and pass them on.

