

In the Saharawi Refugee Camps – Graphic Story Telling as a Reciprocal Education-Activating Method

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Abstract

Rolf Laven's research activity in the refugee camps of the Polisario takes place against the backdrop of the cultural form of the predominantly Muslim Saharawis, which is characterized by textual literacy. The realization of pictorial representations as a means of communication presents a new educational and learning field for these children and their teachers. The focus lies on the role of childlike image-based forms of expression in the process of world- and self-empowerment.

The resulting picture worlds illustrate worldviews from the child perspective; the daily experienced as well as the imagined, have been imprinted.

Images, presentation/representation and their adoption as well as meta-levels are effective for all interactors at the interface of teaching-learning processes on both sides. Methods were participating observation, qualitative empirical study, and phenomenological analysis.

The children's drawings manifest the status of independent documents; complexity and focus do not remain referring exclusively on the narrative content.

The pre-determined theme and resulting pictorial representations favour the reconstruction of childhood in the refugee camps in the Algerian Hamada.

Keywords

Text/Picture Relation, Learning Processes, Interdisciplinary (or “Communicative”) Competencies in the Teaching Profession.

Introduction: The Genesis of the Graphic Novel

The graphic novel as a development of the last decades and now an independent art form, is the focus of this text. The term Graphic Novel is to be understood as a graphic storytelling and refers to the most important condensed stories, which occur in a variety of design variants, from black and white drawings to many-colored chalk works. The term “graphic novel” is often defined as a graphic telling of a story, referring to the narrative as expressed through illustrations that can be carried out in a variety of design options that cover everything from black and white drawings to multi-coloured pastel pictures.

The range of publications includes, among other things, Reports, life reports, transformations of classical works of world literature or travel counts. The graphic novel is presented here in the context of a workshop series on the form’s educational potential. A graphic novel workshop series is presented as an example as an alternative form of communication beyond textual literacy. This took place within the framework of a teacher training in the Saharan refugee camps in Algeria. With the possibilities of the graphic novels, contents from the professional field of the participants were developed by means of art education and design, in the sense of reflecting their own work events, the work reference, for themselves and for others.

Taking advantage of the extensive potential offered by the graphic novel form, participants took material from their own occupational fields and creatively engaged with it through visual

arts education, in the process reflecting upon their own work experiences as well as the relationships between themselves and others. Participants came up with their own stories about their daily professional routines and developed them in detail in the form of sequences of images with occasional supplemental writing. Through nonverbal and playful means, the participants' realities were realized in picture. One's own field of experience was used as a source for creative output, underling the notion that one's own original and personal experience should receive the strongest possible appreciation.

Self-created stories from day-to-day business were developed in detail in the form of successive pictures and picture elements, partly by incorporating writing. In non-verbal and playful ways, life-reality should come to the fore. In particular, one's own area of experience should be experienced as a source of creativity - personal, original, self-referential should be valued. Alternative forms of communication possibilities were created and received as mutually effective educational processes.

The Practical Implementation of Drawing Workshops

Concerning to the present study, Rolf Laven led a graphic novel workshop series in February of 2015/17 and November 2017 with participants formed of schoolteachers in the Sahrawi region. The workshop series was overall part of the cooperative project "Improvement of Teacher Professionalization in the Sahrawi Refugee Camps Near Tindouf, Algeria," targeting the subjects of personal competency and implementing interdisciplinary (communicative) methods in the teaching profession. This project was organized, initiated, and supervised by Dr. Eva Unterweger with the intention of being an exchange of educational delegates from the Ministry of Education of the Polisario, the Arbeiter Samariterbund (an Austrian Charitable Aid Agency), the University College of Teacher Education Vienna, and the Saharawi Assistance Association. Over a period of ten days, twenty-five Saharawi primary school teachers worked on the site of

the Wilhayas Smara, Boujdur, Aswerd Feb. 2015) and Smara Refugee Camp (Feb.2017), Dawla Refugee Camp (Nov.2017).

Procedure

The idea of communicating with teachers about their everyday teaching life through drawings initially arose after inspiring visits to the schools located at the refugee camps in the Western Sahara located near Tindouf, Algeria. Due to the pronounced differences in the culture's school and social systems, it was not assumed that there had been any previous engagement with the graphic or illustrated novel, or that participants would have an individualized drawing style. First, individual graphic expression was defined, actualized and practically developed into a drawn manuscript. The respective teacher-student image was agreed upon as a topic.



Figure 1a & 1b: Teaching moment in an elementary school in Wilayah Smara, Feb. 2017; View of the Aswerd Refugee Camp, Feb. 2015 © Laven

There are many different approaches to the task, including rough sketching, developing a narrative story, collecting ideas onto a page, creating a sketchbook, or writing a script. With the creation of a visualized story from one imagined, it became increasingly easier for the illustrators to create their characters. This came from outlining initial ideas through targeted preliminary markers and signs.

On this basis, teachers visualized their characters and/or heroes and, in the end, made their drawings using lead and ink in a multi-step process that worked in conjunction with creating a scripted narrative.

There were no restrictions with regard to form, colour, or language, and every graphic was a creative form of expression that was directly integrated. No previous time was used for practice, and as such, each first draft was central to the development of the design's core. A variety of drawing materials were offered, including coloured pencils, pastel and wax crayons, black felt-tip pens, fineliner pens, and markers.

Participants made numerous decisions in regards to choice of paper, composition, content, portrait or landscape format, and proportionality. The entire page was drawn using pencil. The participants would make either precise or vague sketches, and the text for each panel could be entered directly onto the page using pencil. As soon as the participants felt satisfied with their pencil drafts, they would begin the next phase of the process, which involved using ink of various weights, such as black felt-tip pens, fineliner pens, and markers. The option to use Chinese ink, which is optimal for creating deep, vivid, and powerful images using a brush, was eliminated due to time constraints as well as the lack of sensible prior experience with its use.

The panels for the introduction of the script, as well as the texts in Arabic calligraphy, were traced using fineliner pens. It was possible to later colorize the drawing using coloured pencils, and pastel and wax crayons. Unnecessary pencil lines were erased near the conclusion, and small corrections could be made by partially scraping out material using Stanley knives. Using white correction colours would have changed the quality of the drawings and added dimension to the paper, and also would have interfered with the immediacy and directness of the drawing. This directness remained evident in the work of the participants. Using various means of artistic expression, such as colour, shade, line widths, and layout, precise atmospheric images and visual worlds were produced in an expressive manner, such to the extent that in

some cases, participants deliberately chose to not include any textual input.



Figure 2a & 2b: Moments from the workshop in the garden of the Smara Education Authority, Feb. 2017, © Laven

Goals

The research activities in the refugee camps of the Polisario took place atop the cultural foundation of the predominantly Muslim Saharawi, one that is primarily characterized by textual literacy. For these teachers, the realizing of visual images as a means of communication was a method that they had never previously encountered and was learned as a new educational approach. The focus rested on the role of visual expression in the process of personal, internal and broader, external appropriation. The resulting illustrated worlds thus illuminated the teacher's perspectives and worldviews. Artists negotiated everyday experiences with imagined material and implemented their vision through graphic means. The presentation, illustrative representation, and reception of the works were experienced at the intersection of teaching and learning processes at mutually effective meta-levels for the participants. Methods included participatory observation, qualitative empirical investigation, and phenomenological analysis (Marotzki and Stoetzer, 2006). The children's drawings demonstrated the conditions of original documents; complexity and focus were not limited to narrative content. The given topic and the resulting

visual representations favoured the reorganization of the job profiles and the living and working environment in the refugee camps in the Algerian Hamada.

A holistic approach was taken to uncovering the individual personalities of the teachers, whereby the focus was not on their weaknesses but rather their competences, interests, and social strengths, all of which were significantly explored and supported. This approach can be described by the term “empowerment,” which is based on ensuring the appreciation of the participants (Herriger, 2014). It identifies processes in which people work out their own affairs and become aware of their individual strengths and abilities, thus gaining self-knowledge. In a setting that fosters coexistence, participation, and creativity, social resources could also be developed that become available for reference in the future. As theorized by Hannah Arendt (1970/1993), the “power to design” is understood as a “power and ability”: “Power springs from the human ability not only to act or to do something, but to unite with others and in agreement to act with them.” (Ibid, 45).

The “principle of the ability to act” takes the place of the empowerment that has already taken place. In the creative acts of the workshop series described here, empowerment and, as a consequence, the ability to act, are no longer theoretical options (Rachbauer, 2010, 76)

Coming to understand the various possibilities offered by the graphic novel was also a professional concern. The project intended to open the potential for telling personal stories, or working through challenging social and political issues. Spheres of activity should have been opened up for testing one’s own artistry, drawing competency, and decision-making in regards to materials, composition, content orientation, format, and proportionality. The individually-selected events to be represented as well as the content of the picture stories should have been immediately comprehensible to the observer. The directness of concept should have been in the foreground. For this benefit, any accuracy should have been purposefully neglected. [Best translation I could come up with – is this what you were trying to say?]

The depicted events in the graphic novel should have been directly related to the target group, which was made up of the teachers themselves. This was a matter of reflecting on one's own work experiences and their working relationships. As such, one's own field of experience was used as the source for their creative output. Exchange and communication manifested in a nonverbal, playful manner should have been created; the reality of the participants' lives was to be depicted. Thus, one's own original, self-referencing narrative of their everyday professional life made up the experience. The creation of the connections between cultures, languages, and distances could be experienced and negotiated in the course of creative activity.



Figure 3: Workshop series, presentations of first drawings, Feb. 2017. © Laven

Professional and communicative interdisciplinary Results

Ideas for the displayed content were at first unconnected collections of notations that were continuously developed and condensed into elaborate pictorial stories. This resulted in strings of well-illustrated characters with developed qualities, each with its own individual design vocabulary; emotions and facial expressions were also employed in various ways with these characters. There was not only a critical examination of the outer appearances of the respective characters, but also of the personalities portrayed in the background story. The heroes depicted in the images (i.e. teachers, pupils) were portrayed in their everyday environment, such as in the school

yard, on their way to school, or in the classroom. Anecdotes were expressed graphically.

The graphic depictions, or, the graphic novel, contain individually-developed and spatially-effective picture divisions with occasional writing; different spatial formatting from rectangles to loose compositions; and often small-scale representations of people, buildings, school furniture, recreational facilities, and the roll call area by the flag. They are partially depicted in bird's eye view (or, Olympic observer) and show direct drawing styles with great expressiveness. Illustrated subject matter included, among other things, the resolutions of conflicts, working through children's encounters with topics such as emotional situations, and playful themes such as sports.

The teachers formed six teams, and their work was created with great motivation in concentration and silence. There was a willingness, in the form of concern, to present one's own work to the whole group. The participants were selected by the school board and were exempted from teaching during the time of this workshop. They were also financially compensated using resources from the workshop series and research project. Everything was made possible in a benevolent, engaged, and open-minded manner on the part of the school authorities and the representatives from the Ministry of Education of Polisario, the employer representatives. The graphic story-telling results were also appreciated by our side.

All in all, the project made it possible to get to know oneself and others in a different way, now from a previously unknown perspective and with otherwise little-known creative means. Additional aspects, including competency in interdisciplinary (communicative?) methods, were further developed by the teachers in the forms of scenic, descriptive performing games, or as performance presentation acted out in front of the whole group. The examination of the general design and drawing content, as well as the specific deepening and development of the characters to be portrayed, took place in conjunction. In addition, factors regarding complex deliberations and implementation were revealed.

The participants explored their own personal realities on their own terms in experimental ways. It was through the picture story that participants found a new, previously unfamiliar mouthpiece with which to comment through on their subjectively-experienced everyday life. The communicative form of the graphic novel made it possible to create something new by combining narrative styles.

The expressive images allowed deeper insights into various aspects of life. The graphic novel itself has the effect of building bridges, a function that is deepened by respectful coexistence and the ability to create and execute one's own ideas. Additionally, the project made it possible to focus specifically on one's own work background and thus encouraged appreciation for the individual experience. The individual experiences of these teachers were further designated as valuable sources for creative activity and expression, and as such were applied in various forms.

Conclusion: Results and Outlook

“Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, ‘and what is the use of a book,’ thought Alice ‘without pictures or conversation?’” (Alice in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll, 1865)

The impressive masterpieces that have been produced in the form of graphic novels have proved their visual power as well as their capacity to cover a variety of topics. Graphic novels are especially attractive for young people, who feel that the form offers a more accessible approach to engaging with difficult, challenging topics. In terms of practical classroom implementation, the endless possibilities offered by pictorial narration allow students to individually link their work to topics of their choice.

Drawings and illustrations have long played an important cultural role as a form of communication. Visual expressions have been used for roughly 30,000 years, beginning with cave paintings and rock carvings. Since then, people have been intensely interested in deciphering these graphic messages, as they exist as visual manifestations of that past culture. By way of comparison, perhaps more attention and interest could be invested in analysing and appreciating the current and emerging forms of graphic communication, as they too offer fundamental insights into a given culture and thus provide a wider capacity for understanding that culture.

The drawings and graphic notations created in this workshop series shed light on life in a refugee camp in the Western Sahara, particularly in the everyday school experiences lived out in Wilayah Smara.

Art and design unfortunately cannot directly prevent the conflicts that lead to flight and emigration, but it can be assumed that communicative potential and exchange contributes towards a small but very direct influence on quality of life. It is both touching and motivating learning to do so through the means of visual art, as motivated participants were able to take individualized expressions and explore them as related to their professional experience. The resulting ability to act in these hitherto unknown forms of education and communication, as well as the self-active use of decision-making and choice options in the design of the graphic novel, point to an expanded awareness, in addition to the actual image results themselves, including that of "action spaces". (Rachbauer, 2010, 77)

Using the medium of a graphic novel enabled a reciprocal approach to educational processes and insights; on the one hand through action, and on the other hand through the presence of graphic descriptions. This created another level in which to foster communication and understanding, one which serves as a bridge between cultures, languages, and spatial differences.



Figure 4a & 4b: Presentations of the graphic novels by the participants. Smara, Feb. 2017 © Ulli Unterweger



Figure 5a, 5b & 5c: Presentations of the graphic novels by the participants. Smara, Feb. 2017, © Ulli Unterweger

The participants of the workshop were made up of primary school teachers coming from four different schools in Smara, a wilayah in the center of the Polisario refugee camp. The graphic illustrations and text fragments can be understood as information that illuminates the socio-cultural environment of everyday life in the camp, thus leading readers and audience members towards a more authentic cultural description of what it is like living together in the camp. In these graphic novels, participants illustrated and wrote out stories and anecdotes that attempted to capture the experiences of their school life.



Figure 6a, 6b & 6c: Presentations of the graphic novels by the participants. Smara, Feb. 2017, © Ulli Unterweger

The graphic novels present the everyday social experiences lived out in the camp, as well as the professional profiles and duties of the teachers and their competencies in interdisciplinary (communicative?) teaching methods. Participants themselves evidently found themselves drawn to school- and education-related topic, and as such were frequently included in their work as meaningful and worth illustrating.

Topics of the graphic novels included, among other things:

- Scenes from the beginning of the lesson
- Dialogues between teachers and students concerning the social, political, and economic situation of the Western Sahara; for example, as found in the view of the panel showing the old borders of the Western Sahara
- Scenes from math lessons and Arabic lessons (see Fig. 10a, 8c)
- Scenes from religious lessons: "The Life of the Child Mohammed"
- A lesson about geography and history with a written test (see Fig. 10c)

Other graphic novels showed teacher's collaborative interactions in everyday classroom life, for example:

- Conflict situations (see Fig. 8b)
- The social behaviour between teachers and students (see Fig. 9c)
- Gift giving from the teacher to the children, depicted with brightly-coloured clothing, wrapping paper, and balloons, much in contrast to the monochromatic representation of everyday life in the camp (see Fig. 10b and 3b)
- Bullying situations (see Fig. 9b)
- A child's route to school
- Rituals and discipline; the beginning of a school day, classroom supervision, physical education, roll call (see Fig. 9a)
- Support activities for children
- Jumping rope, football, and basketball games
- References to future prospects, such as possible participation in secondary education in Algeria (see Fig. 8a)
- The coexistence of a teacher's strict comportment and a benevolent attitude: the image shows a child who regularly comes late to class, due to the fact that the student shares a schoolbag with a sibling who attends a separate school in the afternoon

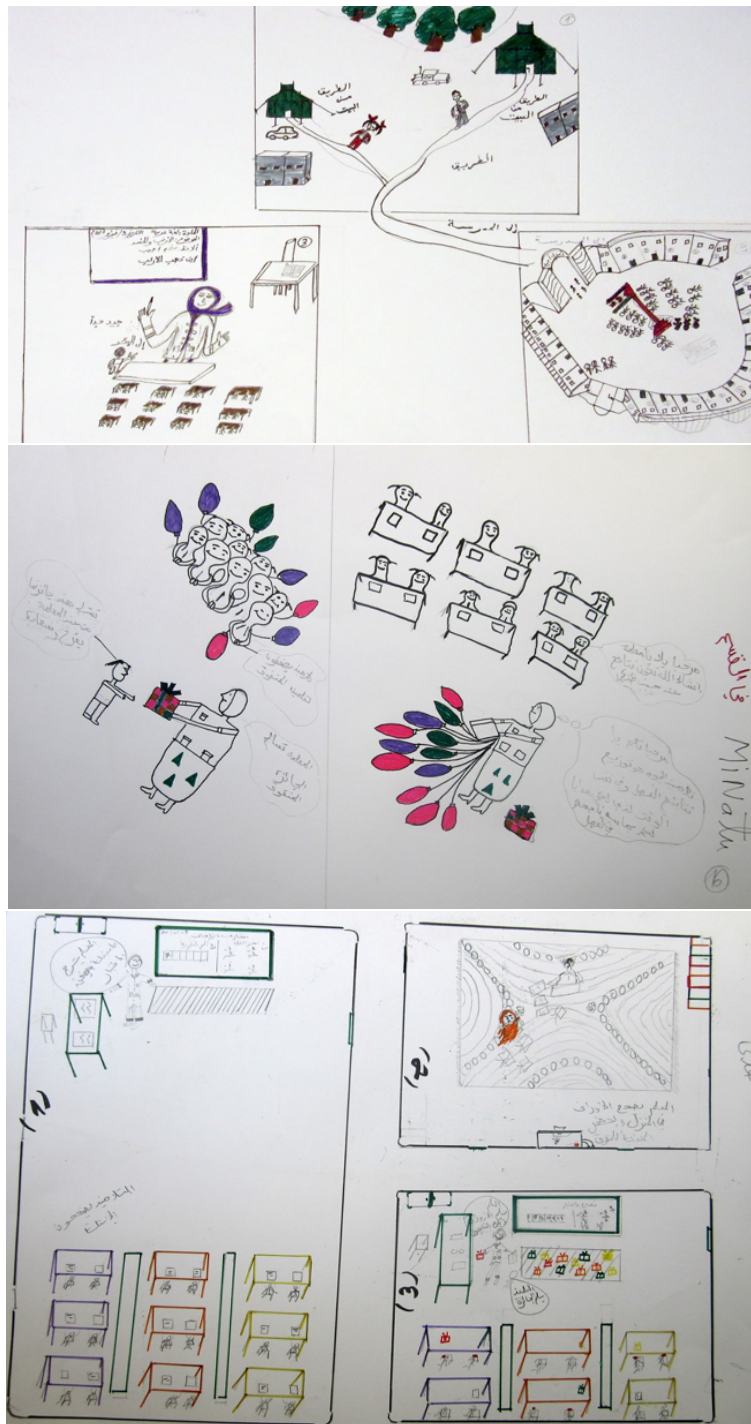


Figure 7a, 7b & 7c: Graphic novels portraying the professional fields of the participants. Smara, Feb. 2017 © Laven

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Summary

The graphic novel, a creative literary and artistic development of the last decades that now stands as its own independent art form, is presented here in the context of a workshop series on

the form's educational potential. The term "graphic novel" is often defined as a graphic telling of a story, referring to the narrative as expressed through illustrations that can be carried out in a variety of design options that cover everything from black and white drawings to multi-coloured pastel pictures. The range of publications includes, among other things, reports, life stories, converted works of classic literature, and travel narratives. The article explores the origins of the term "graphic novel," as well as the various potentials offered by the literary and artistic form through examples of certain masterpieces such as *Maus*, *Persepolis*, and *Fun Home*, and works by Reinhard Kleist. The article also discusses current trends in graphic novel publications. Most importantly, it attempts to demonstrate the various strengths offered by creating illustrated narratives, thus exhibiting its educational potential in the classroom.

A Graphic Novel Workshop Series is presented here as an example, an event that took place within the framework of a teacher training held in the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria. Taking advantage of the extensive potential offered by the graphic novel form, participants took material from their own occupational fields and creatively engaged with it through visual arts education, in the process reflecting upon their own work experiences and relationships between themselves and others. Participants came up with their own stories about their daily professional routines and developed them in detail in the form of sequences of images with occasional supplemental writing. Through nonverbal and playful means, the participants' realities were realized in picture.

One's own field of experience was used as a source for creative output, underling the notion that one's own original and personal experience should receive the strongest possible appreciation. The workshop series intended to create alternative forms of communication that could be used as mutually-effective educational processes.

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