Educational case study

Exploring graphic pathographies in the medical humanities

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While diagrams and visual aids are often used to help patients understand and remember information, the teaching of visual literacy skills in medical education curricula is still in its infancy. In the context of a wider medical humanistic training programme, Michael Green and Kimberly Myers claim that graphic pathographies (book-length comics about illnesses) can be used to teach medical students observational and interpretive skills. Along similar lines, Ian Williams highlights the suitability of graphic pathographies as teaching aids for the development of history-taking skills. This educational case study describes a 2-h session on graphic pathographies, designed for King’s College London’s summer school, ‘The Boundaries of Illness: An Introduction to the Medical Humanities’ and attended by 15 international undergraduate students of biomedical sciences.

Using the theoretical writings of Will Eisner and Scott McCloud, students were introduced to the constituent elements of comics (eg, word-image interplay, sequentiality and closure). Special attention was devoted to the additional meaning carried by formal elements: for example, black gutters between panels can intensify the depiction of characters’ depression, while an unconventional panel arrangement can either reinforce the theme of social oppression or contribute to a sense of liberation.

In the specific case of graphic pathographies, students were invited to consider three analytical foci:

1. Embodiment: Eisner first recognised the crucial role of embodiment in graphic storytelling: ‘[i]n comics, body posture and gesture occupy a position of primacy over text. The manner in which these images are employed modifies and defines the intended meaning of the words.’ Accordingly, Susan Squier suggests that comics can convey the complex social impact of a physical or mental impairment, as well as the way the body registers social and institutional constraints. In class, we discussed an episode from David B’s Epileptic in which the protagonist Jean-Christophe has a seizure in the streets and is mistaken for a drug-addict, mistreated and arrested by the police. His convulsive body is deformed and stretched to enclose the whole page: on a metaphorical level, it is socially burdensome, almost redundant. Students were thus presented with a vivid embodied depiction of surveillance abuse in matters of disability and mental impairment.

2. Literalisation of metaphors: When reconstructing their illness experience in narrative, patients often devise metaphors in an attempt to domesticate trauma and life change. Illness metaphors are frequently rendered in their literal sense in graphic pathographies. An example is Matthew Johnstone’s I Had A Black Dog: the phrase ‘to have a black dog on one’s back’—a metaphor for depression, popularised, among others, by Winston Churchill—is literalised in the form of an actual black dog that follows the protagonist around. By sitting on the flying line of Matthew’s kite or by resting its paws on his plate at dinner, this often larger-than-life dog physically prevents the protagonist from engaging in daily, pleasurable activities. The literalised metaphor of the black dog, thus, powerfully conveys the idea of depression, experienced as an external force imposing on someone’s mood and causing loss of interest or initiative.

Although they might occasionally appear bizarre, literalised metaphors criticise the implied accuracy of medical concepts when it comes to subjective illness experiences: students were thereby alerted to the arbitrariness of denotative scientific terms. A sequence of panels on biopsy in Brian Fies’s Mom’s Cancer (figure 1), for example, illustrates a mismatch between doctors’ and carers’ views by means of a literalised metaphor. The reassuring suggestion of Brian’s mother’s doctor of metastatic biopsy—instead of brain surgery, a more invasive sampling procedure—does not take into account Brian’s distress at the thought that almost every part of his mother’s body contains cancerous cells. This is depicted in a grotesque portrait of his mother as a maple tree, with taps and buckets for the collection of ‘cancer syrup’.

3. Superheroes: The creation of Superman in 1938 inaugurated a long-lasting tradition of superheroes, especially in comics in English. The extraordinary physical attributes and powers of superheroes are useful visual strategies for the depiction of patients’ reactions (eg, hope, resilience, anger) to their illness experience: the overwhelming intensity of these feelings vis-à-vis life-changing illnesses is implicitly equated to the astonishing transformation of ordinary characters into superheroes in comics.

The class discussed a panel from David Wojnarowicz’s Seven Miles a Second, a graphic novel about AIDS: here the protagonist transforms into a raging giant à la Hulk, who smashes up St Patrick’s Cathedral in New York. Students were invited to reflect on the stereotypical 1990s depiction of emaciated people with AIDS, as well as on the institutionalised discursive constraints on them. Students were then divided into groups and asked to analyse selected panels from various

graphic pathographies. One group was assigned a page from Marisa Marchetto’s Cancer Vixen, in which the protagonist is given a pegfilgrastim injection to stimulate the production of white blood cells during chemotherapy. In this vignette, students were expected to draw a comparison between the two contrasting metaphors for the injection on the page: the triumphant army of reinforced white blood cells (as described by healthcare professionals) and the patient’s own visualisation of the injection as a truckload of wet cement directly poured into her arm. The students nonetheless supplemented this comparative analysis with a thorough interpretation of the bottom section of the page in which they had found a temporal indication of clinical relevance. Though the lack of traditional gutters hampers the sequential reading of this section, the patient’s severe bone pain (a common side effect of pegfilgrastim) is depicted as gradually worsening over time and the students concluded that a doctor visiting this patient might suggest administering pain relief.

Despite the brief time span of this session, the students improved their understanding of narrative temporality by examining the sequential component of graphic storytelling, and incorporated this new awareness into their diagnostic reasoning skills. The vivid pictures and condensed texts in graphic pathographies engendered powerful and immediate responses in the students and also helped overcome linguistic issues in the class.

This rewarding initiative signals the need for a more systematic use of graphic storytelling in medical education, especially in the context of international student populations.

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