

# Co-producing composite storytelling comics: (counter) narratives by academics of working-class heritage

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## Abstract

Composite storytelling as a social qualitative research method represents a growing spirit of creativity to explore themes of social injustice. This article discusses the potential methodological affordances and challenges of such approaches when used to collectively unsettle, interrogate and (re)imagine what it means to become an academic of working-class heritage. The participatory project discussed in this paper involved eight social science and humanities academics in UK-based elite higher education institutions. In a series of storytelling sessions, the participants created narrative encounters to foster moments of critique and analysis to explore the complex social

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realities of their routes into and through academia as people of working-class origins. Working alongside an illustrator, the participants used empirical insights to create composite stories in multimodal comic formats. Through this work, we seek to prompt further discussions about the generative possibilities of pursuing similar methods in the social sciences and beyond to challenge forms of social injustice.

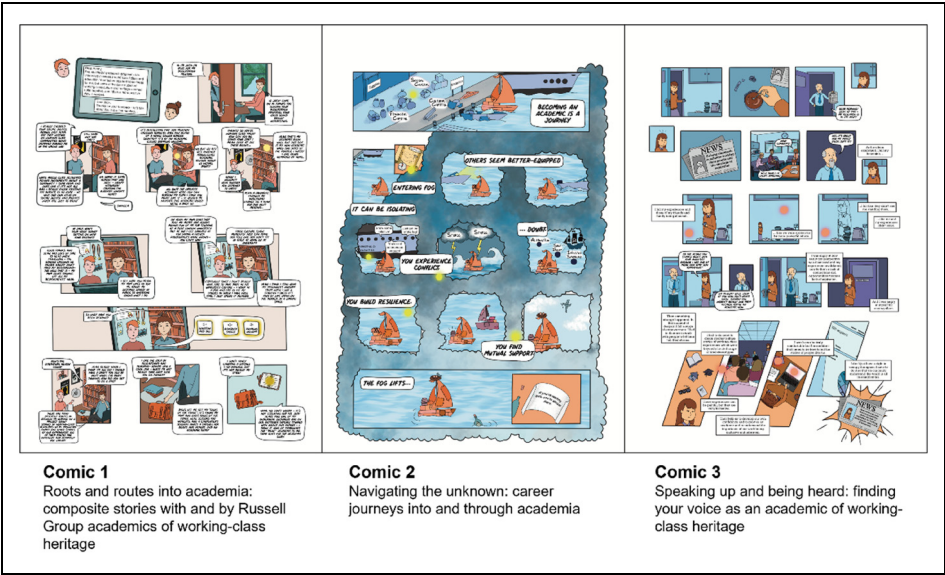
### Keywords

working-class, composite stories, comic-based research, academic identity, elite universities, emotions

## Introduction

In contemporary social science research, inquirers from across disciplines are adopting a spirit of creativity and imagination to both create and share knowledge. The social sciences are unique in drawing from the natural sciences and the humanities. Much work has been done, particularly in *Qualitative Research* to blur and remove the binary boundaries of Snow's (1993) 'two cultures' of quantitative science and the more qualitative humanities. Savage and Burrows (2007) have called for new methods and approaches to be adopted in sociology and for researchers to expand methodological repertoires as practitioners. Focusing on Education research, Power (2023) builds on the thesis of Savage and Burrows (2007) to advocate for a descriptive turn in research which adopts new methods and approaches from outside of the academy as well as within it. Creative research innovations such as photography, poetry and music have been applied to Human Geography (Von Benzon et al., 2021) and the social sciences with technology and arts-based research (Gauntlett, 2007). Social Science fiction is developing approaches which draw upon traditional scholarship to explore theory and concepts using narrative and story (Matthews, 2022). Innovations in literary studies have resulted in fields such as *Creative Nonfiction* being added as a fourth genre of literature alongside poetry, fiction and drama (Root & Steinberg, 2012). Journalism has also adopted creative approaches, moving from a neutral reporting of 'facts' to build on the 'New Journalism' of the 1960s, diverging into comics journalism and nonfiction storytelling (Weber and Rall, 2017). The genre of creative nonfiction combines personal experiences with literary-writing techniques, which the *Creative Nonfiction* journal describes as the genre of 'True Stories, well told'. These forms offer flexibility and freedom while adhering to the rigour and methods of nonfiction (Gutkind, 2006). Adopting these creative approaches, however, does not reject methodological rigour and the foundations with which academic research is built upon. In this article, we highlight how the storytelling methods we mobilised illustrate the development of creative research methodologies for adaptation by scholars across academic disciplines.

This project created opportunities for a group of eight academics identifying as being of working-class heritage to interrogate and (re)imagine their lived experiences. Through a series of storytelling sessions, the participants created three composite stories as interactive comics (Figure 1). These multimodal forms represent their experiences transitioning into and through academic spaces reproducing forms of middle-class privilege (Wakeling, 2010). Stories about working-class cultures in academia are often portrayed in spatio-temporal terms where a central concern is fit and belonging. Academics of



**Figure 1.** Thumbnail examples of the three comics created during the project.

working-class heritage (AWCH) are characterised as existing in liminal states, betwixt and between their parent cultures and the middle-class domains of academia (Ingram and Abrahams, 2015; Walkerdine, 2021). Transitions are often framed in the language of loss, and or escape, characterising working-class communities as lacking cultural wealth (Lawler, 2014; Lee, 2017; Cruz, 2021). However, these deterministic and fatalistic representations fail to capture the contradictions, ambiguities and complexities of working-class lived experiences (Morley, 2021; Poole, 2021). Spatial, gendered, generational, geographical, racial, cultural, economic, social and epistemic considerations reinforce that there are ‘many stories, of many places, in many voices, pointing toward many ends’ (Cronon, 1992: 1347). This project sought to harness differences and similarities as creative opportunities to author stories which extended the possibilities of representing being and becoming an AWCH. Our aim was twofold: (1) to highlight the heterogeneity of working-class experiences in academia to extend the possibilities of expression beyond a narrow range of persistent stereotypes and (2) to identify the methodological possibilities of using collective composite storytelling methods and comic-based research approaches to communicate and exchange knowledge with audiences within and beyond academia.

The collective authorial process represented a form of identity work where we worked with memories to make sense of who we were becoming as AWCH (Allard and Doecke, 2017). Collective storytelling allows for theory and empirical work to coalesce creatively with everyday life to support participants make sense of their ongoing transformations of self (Davies and Gannon, 2006). Inquiry into individuals’ experiences and the social structures they inhabit is one of the foundational ideas of social research, and a socio-logical imagination (Mills, 2000). Sociology can be considered an art form with

themes, styles, landscapes (as social structures), portraits (as individual experiences) and motion (as progress, development and dialectical change) (Nisbet, 2002). The methodology outlined in this paper aligns with Nisbet's concept of sociology as art. Through different creative methods, we explored the portraits of our own experiences as part of the landscape of collective experience within the group. Wider theories of social class and higher education helped us to understand the narrative process of motion, change and becoming. Equally we deployed a sociological imagination to look at individual and collective experiences within wider social structures.

Pursuing the creative possibilities of research provides opportunities to engage with worldviews of others through listening with and through discomfort (McGloin, 2015). The collective biographical approach adopted as part of this work brought moments of generative discomfort, and joy, as we disrupted, interrogated and (re)imagined becoming an AWCH. Forming as a collective, our biographies became the sites of inquiry and critique to create representations of experience on our terms, and not those of some privileged other, which Walkerdine (2021) suggests is often the case when working-class lives are researched. In this sense, stories are both the objects and methods of inquiry where 'the subject and object of [the] research are brought much closer together' (Davies and Gannon, 2006: 2). The collective act of writing and creating allowed us to explore the complex entanglements of time, space, place and people to make sense of our own lives, as individuals, who in similar and different ways identified as becoming AWCH.

The remainder of this article is a working example of how the project created opportunities for collective acts of authorship aimed at understanding what it might mean to become an AWCH. We have organised the text into three main sections. We begin by outlining the methodological principles underpinning the project, which includes a discussion of counter-storytelling approaches. In this section, we highlight the role of composite storytelling in counter-narrative traditions, the place of comics in the research as well as the study's ethical dimensions. In section two, we reflect on the creative process, discussing the methods we used to create the composite stories. This description is designed to be used and adapted by others in their own work. In the final section, we consider the implications of our work for research and practice in educational contexts.

## Storytelling methodology

Story (telling) circles created a space for us to explore our memories to understand how we arrived at our current positions as academics of working-class origins. This work generated the source materials for the composite stories we crafted into the final comics. Our creative approach offered collective opportunities to explore our subjugated experiences as AWCH in the middle-class spaces of academia, with a view to making our positions visible (Speedy and Porter, 2014). Objects, images and anecdotes of experience, some of which became multimodal features in the final comics, acted as dialogic prompts during the story circle sessions. Collectively sharing, interrogating and (re)imagining our stories to create the composites created moments of narrative rupture to develop new understandings. The interrogation and (re)imagining continued into the writing process, which became a source of connection, making us aware that our developing sense of self was

multi-layered and intersubjectively dependent for good, bad and everything in between on other selves we shared our lives with (Frank, 2010; Yagelski, 2012; Stauffer, 2015).

We created multimodal comics, using different formats and genres to produce layers of interconnected meanings. These included comic panels with artwork and speech bubbles as well as audio artefacts in the form of monologues and dialogues, which we discuss in more detail below. We worked with an illustrator to make the stories visible and audible. As with any creative work of this nature, the process was reliant on the affordances of the selected medium, access to resources, time, space and the skillsets and experience of the co-production team. This work was made possible by a small grant from the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) awarded to the principal investigator (PI), who was also a participant. We recognise that the award afforded us creative opportunities and choices of output other researchers may not have. We stress, however, that interactive comics are just one medium and the method we are discussing here could be used with a range of media formats, including those which require fewer or more resources. This work proposes ways of working that imagine educational futures where teams work within, and across disciplines as part of shared design tasks (Wardak, Wilson and Zeivots, 2024).

We chose the interactive comic medium because we valued the versatility of modality it offered to create accessible composite stories for diverse audiences. We identified interactivity in two main ways. Firstly, the possible affordances of the medium, the content and the interface design allow users to choose their own narrative path through the comics. Secondly, we imagine interactivity developing as the stories prompt audience members to think about their own stories in relation to their own developing sense of self. The comics represent 'writerly texts', that is, filters of interpretative possibility, as opposed to representations of a timeless absolute realities (Bruner, 1986: 26). Put simply, the comics act as interpretative prompts which invite audiences to explore their own experiences and those of others in relation to becoming a person in the socio-spatial contexts their reflections are grounded in.

Comics are methodologically versatile, reaching across disciplines to creatively shape research designs, data generation and analyses (Kuttner et al., 2021). Despite the disciplinary diversity in the group, we shared an experience of identifying as being from working-class backgrounds. Furthermore, we had a collective interest in the potential of comics to represent the complex semiotic and narrative complexities of our life histories in educationally accessible ways (Kuttner et al., 2021). We drew on sources visualising field notes in participatory research with young children (Tatham-Fashanu, 2023) and comic-based studies adding powerful public engagement dimensions to emotive social justice issues such as university tuition fees (Priego, 2016; Vigurs et al., 2016). Flowers (2017) uses comics as inquiry in a similar way, working alongside teachers and students in an educational setting to make meaning from their own experiences. In addition to the methodological versatility the comic form brought us, it also allowed *us* to bring our personal stories to life, unlike other forms of academic writing which can often flatten them (White, 2021).

### ***Problematizing dominant representations through composite storytelling***

Alongside comics as a medium, we worked with composite storytelling methods, which are extensively used in critical race theory (CRT). Narrative forms such as family

histories, (auto)biographies and collective biographies position lived experience as sites of inquiry. This allows researchers to explore and understand how power relationships lead to some accounts of everyday reality being privileged over others (Carmona and Luschen, 2014). The methods create countering spaces where the universality of master narratives and majoritarian stories which become dominant discourses throughout society and the media can be challenged (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). Counter-narratives have the potential to subvert simple binaries and stereotypes which limit the possibilities of representing what it means to become a person as part of an under-represented social group (Harper, 2009). When considering the lived experiences of AWCH, stereotypes are often limited to representations of the plucky socially mobile hero escaping their working-class parent culture, or the perpetual victim (Morley, 2021). While stereotypes can be reductive, we were mindful that for some people the realities they represent, or aspects of them, may resonate as authentic. Therefore, rather than dismiss stereotypes as epistemically baseless, we worked with the potential complexities and contradictions they offered, using these as opportunities to make new meanings (Davies and Gannon, 2006). Our discussions in the story circles and the comic design sessions pushed us into a much more nuanced and exploratory view of the term AWCH. At times, this also placed us in positions of discomfort to ask if we should have a voice in this space given that our current lives have little resemblance with the material realities of our origins. At one point in the study, for one participant, unsettling stereotypes and memories prompted her to question if she was working-class enough to participate. As we discuss below, the intent to create moments of ontological instability brought with it ethical responsibilities.

Composite storytelling methods offer authors creative possibilities to capture the inter-textual richness of life histories shared as part of the research process. Johnston et al. (2021: 2) define the composite story as ‘a first-person account that is written as a vignette by using data from multiple participants’ interview transcripts to represent a specific aspect of the research findings’. Examples of composite stories drawn from qualitative data include Johnston et al.’s (2021) vignettes representing students’ classroom experiences and Willis’s (2019) representations of views of climate change held by a group of UK members of Parliament. In both studies, the composite approach allowed the researchers to create representations of the participants’ lived realities, incorporating literary techniques not possible with many forms of academic writing. We also drew on sources considering experiences of marginalised groups across a range of settings. This seemed appropriate given the location of our study in fields considering themes such as academic identity, and marginalisation in higher education. These sources included explorations of racial injustice in high school settings through personally authored digital stories (Rolón-Dow, 2011); reflections on the possibilities of using personal biographies as sites of resistance against ineffective schooling (Fernández, 2002); collective counter-storytelling methods highlighting how approaches to equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education can foster experiences of tokenism (Doharty et al., 2021) and the possibilities of counter-storytelling to offer racially minoritized voices opportunities to control how their experiences are represented as part of research processes (Martinez, 2014). Taken together, these examples illustrate the generative possibilities of using storytelling approaches to imagine more hopeful educational futures (Hrastinski and Jandrić, 2023). These counter-storytelling approaches also represent

the adoption of a descriptive turn in educational research methodologies as advocated by Power (2023).

Writing collectively in this manner, weaving aspects of individuals' stories into a composite, offered the group a sense of ontological security as their anonymity was retained. This allayed some participants' fears about how visible it would make them to people outside the project. Consistent with other studies, anxieties around coming out as working-class in the Academy were a constant presence in the project (Binns, 2019). Therefore, from an ethical perspective, the composite approaches provided us with some assurances that we could safely represent our experiences without people knowing who individual stories belonged to. However, as we created the composite stories, there were concerns the process led to some individuals' experiences being excluded as we decided on what the final comics would look like. Given the spatial limitations of the comic form, we could not include everything we shared in the story circles. When considering our commitment to vocalising under-represented testimonies, we therefore had to acknowledge the methodological potential for the process to further silence already muted voices. To overcome these issues, we worked collectively with the illustrator to iteratively (re)draft and develop the stories. Every participant was actively involved in the story-boarding processes and in the creative decisions made when producing and agreeing on the final versions of the comics.

We also had concerns about credibility, particularly how audiences would judge the authenticity of our stories. Criticisms of forms of fiction work in research often raise concerns about the reliability and validity of participant testimonies; worries grounded in enduring positivist conceptualisations of what 'good' research is (Davies and Gannon, 2006). To address these anxieties, we drew on sources which advocated using verbatim sections of text taken from research dialogues – in our case the story circles – to create composites. Johnston et al. (2021) and Willis (2019) maintain that this adds transparency and rigour to studies using composites by clarifying how data was generated and used. This is a key ethical and creative decision which should be grounded in the context of each research project, considering the participants' needs and wishes. Like all aspects of the composite process, a key feature and consideration was collective authorship. Throughout the composite creation process, when presented with content choice, methodological and ethical challenges, we met regularly to work through any concerns or issues we had. Participants reflected on the galvanising effect this collective dialogic approach had on creating a sense of trust within the group; something we discuss in more detail below when reflecting on the generative potential of working in a creative and less structured way to idealised notions of traditional research.

### *Working in a messy place to generate meaning*

Methodologically, we sought to create 'narrative encounters' (Goodson and Gill, 2011: 79) to foster the collective memory work from which our composite stories would be created. Our encounters prompted us to be attentive to how the historically located social and culture dimensions of our lived experiences shaped, and continue to shape, our developing sense of self as AWC. The process sought to make the familiarity of our memories strange enough so that they might offer interpretive opportunities to reimagine them in other ways (Mannay, 2010; Goodson and Gill, 2011). With a

methodological intention to unsettle, this process created what Cook (2009) conceptualises as ‘messy area[s]’. These are generative spaces ‘for the exchange of perceptions and beliefs, a place of co-construction where strands of knowledge and learning are unearthed and critiqued’ (Cook, 2009: 281). For messy areas to be generative, participants must be committed to shared moments of intentional reflection and theorising on individual or shared experiences of emotionality (Weiser et al., 2023). Participants reflected on how the process only worked because of a commitment to embrace a more organic approach to meaning making. One participant reflected on how as someone who likes rules, she conversely appreciated having the creative freedom to collectively explore and reflect on topics she chose to as opposed to having them pre-defined by the PI. Despite an appreciation of the relaxed, organic design approach, tensions did develop as participants asked for more direction from the PI. This was to take account of the the busy, complex demands participants faced everyday as academics.

Working in a messy area, we recognised that emotional rupture was a necessary unsettling part of the story telling and creation process. It created the complicating actions stories need to keep audiences engaged as narratives progress towards their endings. As one participant reflected when discussing his participation in the study, ‘... we’ve [the participants] experienced some sort of conflict or some sort of dissonance which compelled us to reflect on it. And this conversation has been a good way of sort of unravelling it and understanding it...’ As another participant pointed out, the emotional work was ‘tortuous in and of itself ..., [yet] wonderful and rewarding’ as it prompted her to resist performing a certain story in an effort to create one that was authentic. This, she reflected, meant telling a story representing a range of emotions, not just ‘terrible struggle and pain’, even though this is how it was for her. This participant’s reflection illustrates that without a commitment to working ethically with the messy possibilities of keeping meaning open, critical hope needed to challenge epistemic and methodological orthodoxies cannot develop (Boler, 2014).

We acknowledged that to consciously disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs rails against the most basic of human desires to find stability at times of uncertainty and ambiguity (Boler, 1999). Therefore, collective care was needed to ensure that any discomfort created did not manifest itself as lasting psycho-emotional harm (Walker & Palacios, 2016). To guard against lasting distress, we set expectations early in the study about how we would work, factoring in moments for collective reflection on how the study was affecting us. These moments of collective reflection acted as ‘ethical safety nets’ to mitigate against any emotional dissonance caused leading to lasting distress or harm (Zembylas and McGlynn, 2012: 56). For example, after the second session, the group requested the third session become an opportunity to emotionally decompress by considering how the memory work was affecting us. This was opposed to the planned focus on further exploration of an aspect of our academic experiences. The ethically responsive nature of the process was a reflexive aspect of the methodology as opposed to a separate aspect to consider as part of the research design (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). It illustrated the need in work of this nature to be attentive to the in situ ethics of a process which has the potential to take people back to places in their past they may not have expected visiting again. In addition to responding to participants’ immediate ethical needs, the PI put in place other ‘ethical safety nets’ such as providing the participants with opportunities to stop sessions if they became too



discomforted, a back channel with the PI to discuss concerns and access to counselling through a UK-based support organisation for educators.

Throughout this work, we were reminded of how potentially vulnerable sharing stories could make us. The sharing process, particularly in the initial stages, was not without risk as we could not be sure how others would respond to our testimonies (Biesta, 2006). Participants reflected that the reciprocal sharing, listening to and critiquing of stories created trust in the group. As one participant reflected, 'I think the sense of community that was built in the group made it so you wanted to share, you wanted to contribute. You wanted to... to give something to the space and to these people by both sharing while also engaging and reflecting on other people's experiences'. Through sharing moments of vulnerability and discussing how the process was affecting us, we created communicative norms needed to keep the space safe. However, another participant pointed out when moving into the smaller design groups from the larger story circle group, this trust had to be negotiated again as the dynamic had shifted. This observation resonates with Armstrong et al. (2023) who observe that owing to the social and spatial factors of participatory research, trust must be iteratively renegotiated as we get to know each other. In short, the existence of trust can never be taken-for-granted and needs to be worked at to ensure participants feel they safely belong in the space. This means pausing to collectively step back and consider how the sharing process is affectively impacting participants.

## **Creative process and methods**

Concerns about the trustworthiness of more creative forms of research are historically persistent. The accuracy of representations of reality in composite formats is often questioned due to reimagining of experiences and their crafting into a final story (McElhinney and Kennedy, 2022). Therefore, as Johnston, Wildy and Shand (2021) state, the researcher needs to illustrate with transparency the creative processes involved in producing composite stories. That transparency is not only in relation to the dissemination of work across different audiences, but also includes making clear the research process leading to the creation of stories. In this section, we discuss in more depth how we worked when making authorial choices to shape the comics. An integral part of this process was a commitment to work with, and learn from, different epistemic positions we brought to the inquiry. The multiple theoretical and methodological standpoints led to a collective reflexivity where the accuracy of the stories became the responsibility of everyone. The story circles and the comic design processes dialogically fostered opportunities to suggest, question and contest ideas as we worked towards creating our comics.

During the story circles, we collectively worked with our personal memories and experiences to create narrative data to develop the composite narrative comics. The story circles were more than mere sites of data generation, though. The reciprocal approach of working within the story circles did much to bring the group together as a cohesive whole (see Davis et al., 2022). While varied in terms of methods and activities, story circle approaches in general create dialogic spaces of inquiry where participants learn from and with each other by sharing stories around themes of everyday life (Hartley and McWilliam, 2009). Story circles are versatile in terms of where they can

be hosted, be it in face-to-face contexts such as the anti-racist work of Bell (2021) or online as in the Emory University Project, 'Stories from the Pandemic', an endeavour which sought to create a space for people to make sense of the COVID-19 Pandemic. From a practical perspective, our approach closely followed the method proposed by Emory (DeLozier, 2020), which itself was based on practices devised by the Roadside Theatre, an artists' collective formed in 1975 in the Appalachian Mountain communities of the USA. Their work incorporates diverse creative formats such as storytelling, music making, dance, poetry, mixed-media approaches and theatre. They advocate grounding practices in the communities they work within, which aligned with the co-production ethos we embraced as part of efforts to develop a communal approach to inquiry (Banks et al., 2019).

The study took place between September 2021 and December 2022. We began the project with a series of story circles, which took place via Microsoft Teams. The software allowed for remote communication. As a group, we lived across a wide area of the UK. Therefore, Teams allowed us to come together cheaply and without logistical worries associated with travelling. Given the ubiquity of online platforms like Teams because of COVID, we were all familiar with its functionality. It also generated recordings and transcripts which we worked with to create the comics. Drawbacks, while minimal, included issues around connectivity owing to differing levels of broadband width and limited access to the chat feature because participants accessed the sessions on guest Teams accounts. Despite these minor limitations, the online nature of the collaborations worked well. Each of the initial four weekly story circles focused on a theme: (1) biographical journeys into HE; (2) what it means to be and become an AWC; (3) emotional work of telling stories as part of the project and (4) consolidating themes. In each session, participants would take it in turns to speak for up to 5 minutes on the chosen theme. Once one story was finished, the next participant shared their story. Sessions concluded with a plenary where we explored in more depth themes we had discussed. During these discussions, we brought in theories and concepts we worked with in our own academic disciplinary spaces. For example, one participant introduced the group to the concept of border crossing as posited by cultural theorist Raymond Williams. The notion of crossing through cultural and social spaces in a state of liminality was a constant point of reference for all our work, illustrated in the audio monologue, *Coming Home*.<sup>1</sup> Williams himself was an AWC and his work straddled the social sciences and humanities, in line with the methodological approaches outlined in this article.

Finding a story to tell can often be challenging. Therefore, to support us craft stories to tell, we worked with artefacts to prompt discussion. These artefacts included images, drawings, songs and other everyday objects. The artefacts grounded our stories in the material and symbolic realities of our own lived experiences (see Figure 2). The artefacts also provided emotional distance by providing the storytellers with something to focus on other than themselves (Ingram, 2018). One participant reflected that the artefacts 'lowered the affective filter ... [and] just made it a little bit more easy to share stuff ... you could distance yourself from it [artefact] or you could bring it closer. You know, you're in control of the message'. Sometimes, the artefacts individuals shared also triggered memories in other participants which led to them changing their stories mid-story circle. The artefacts were not only integral to the stories but to also creating a sense of



**Figure 2.** Objects and images provoking discussions during story circles.

connection in the group. A participant discussed how a medical card from her childhood in her country sparked others to have recollections about similar experiences. Through this sharing, a bond was created because as she put it, she felt like ‘...yes, someone understands my frustration’.

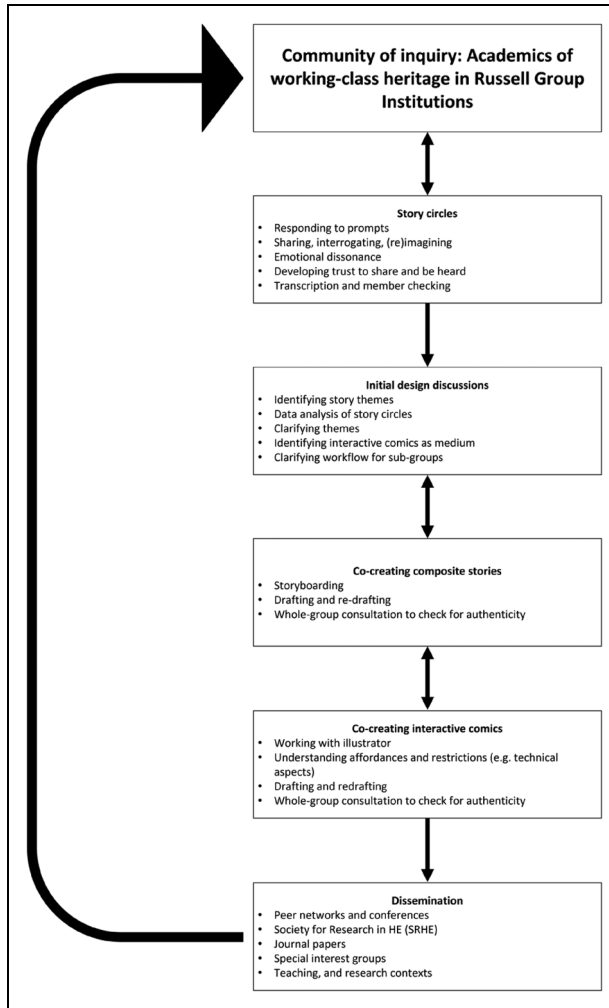
### *Creating the composite stories and interactive comics*

Following the story circles, the project moved on to the design stage to create the composite stories and the interactive comics. The main group split into three self-selecting sub-groups<sup>2</sup>, which were organised around the following main themes developed from the story circle data:

1. Perspectives of being and becoming an AWCH.
2. Routes into higher education (career pathways).
3. Developing epistemic confidence.

While there were differences in how the sub-groups met, communicated and organised themselves, the design process below was similar for all (see Figure 3):

1. One member of the wider group developed the above main themes from the story circle transcripts. NVIVO was used to support the analytical process.
2. Themes and data categories were shared with the design groups. Each sub-group worked with a different theme.



**Figure 3.** Overview of the project process.

3. Sub-groups worked with the data to shape their stories. This involved collectively interrogating the themes and categories to create a story.
4. Within each sub-group, participants identified a process of authorship to create the stories. This process differed in the groups. In one, the writing was more simultaneous with three people authoring their story in conjunction. In another group of two people, one person drafted a story, with the other group member commenting and shaping the draft further. The different approaches illustrated the numerous ways to mobilise the collective authoring process.
5. Working with the illustrator to develop the stories into interactive comic formats involved further drafting and story-boarding. This process also included

choosing the text-based, audio and visual layers which added depth to the representations.

6. Final drafts of all three comics were shared with the original group of eight participants to check the credibility of representations and to suggest further changes.
7. Comics were published online to continue discussions with wider audiences via outputs such as conferences, a project report and social media.

*Creative considerations and the role of the illustrator.* Creating the comics involved design choices about the forms and modalities of representation, e.g. visual, textual, diagrammatic, conversational and transcribed audio content. The design process provided us with opportunities to ‘re-configure [our] own understanding of self, other, and the world’ (Goodson and Gill, 2011: 74). The collective writing process created possibilities to (re)imagine how our historical connections to social spaces discursively shaped our sense of becoming human (Davies and Gannon, 2006). As noted above, the move from ‘data production’ through story circles did not represent a binary rupture into respective writing and creating phases. Rather, these processes were creatively entangled as we worked to create interactive comics representing our experiences as AWCH.

The spatial dimensions of the comic format meant some content would be included, and some would not. Therefore, as with any social process where creative choices have to be made, there was always the possibility for tensions. However, the illustrator’s knowledge of the comic creation process mediated against tensions developing into creative standoffs. As one participant reflected, the illustrator helped her group contain their story within the spatial limitations of the comic, something the group were struggling to do. This dialogic process working with the illustrator distilled and developed aspects of the stories. The creative process of structure, exposition, dialogue and the basics of a story were created and then presented to the illustrator. Katy Vigers (Priego, 2016) describes how providing illustrators with just interview transcripts can result in different interpretations, so a close working relationship is required between the illustrator and the people the stories originate with. We found that a collective writing process between us, the participants, and the illustrator, with regular meetings and editing was conducive to a mutually agreed tone, style and message for each comic. Through this process, composite stories were developed into the medium of the interactive comic. This allowed for further crafting and (re)authoring of the story, working within the affordances of the project budget and medium; multimodality (text and image); sequence and simultaneity (a narrative in sequential order, as acts and scenes) and style and voice (creativity and self-expression) (Kuttner et al., 2021).

As with many creative forms, comics have communicative benefits and limitations. Space and words are at a premium in comic form. They afford and restrict in the most basic semiotic form as speech bubbles, thought bubbles, text boxes and frames around images (McCloud, 2017). As we moved from storyboard to comics and attempted to fit with the affordances of the medium, further questions about the authenticity and message of the story developed. Tweaks to dialogue sought to balance the medium and the narrative (empirical and creative), with vital input from the illustrator. While initially aimed at students from working-class backgrounds in, or considering postgraduate studies, as the comics developed, it became clear they had the potential to connect beyond this target group. Therefore, communicative dimensions such as tone and register were considered when making the comics accessible to people within, and beyond what might

be characterised as working-class academia. On top of the ethical decisions about what experiences we included, we also considered how choices of language and imagery would affect audience engagement. The illustrator helped us to craft character dialogue and imagery to move the story on, what is known as exposition in story structure (Yorke, 2014). The spatial limitations of speech bubbles and text boxes made us think with succinctness and brevity.

As a project group, we trusted in the illustrator's commitment to care for our stories and us as part of the design process, particularly as this medium was new to us. There was also trust among the group that no decisions would be made which led to the misrepresentation of individuals. Kuttner, Weaver-Hightower and Sousanis (2021) conclude, ethics and quality are underexplored areas in comics-based research with (mis)representation and the protection of participant identities key whilst also maintaining validity of data. Outputs must also be coherent to a wide target audience, beyond the group of research participants and other academics. When creating Comic 3, *Speaking Up and Being Heard*<sup>3</sup>, the core of the story centred around an incident from one participant's early career. However, upon completion of the story, the participant felt it left her too recognisable. Therefore, the storyline was changed to reflect a composite of experiences within the group when people had felt silenced by more powerful others. Debriefing sessions were constant, with the PI reiterating that participants should not share anything they felt compromised their identity. This collective responsibility for the ethical dimensions of the project sought to foster the trust needed to share, critique and reimagine lived experiences. Having in place these check points gave the process a sense of transparency. This in turn was seen by the group as strengthening trust that nothing would be intentionally done which could be harmful or distressing.

The creation of text-based and audio artefacts layered into the 2D comics retains a sense of curated diversity, grounded in the multiple lived experiences of the group. The comics also captured the convergence and divergence of epistemic viewpoints within the group. This can be seen in the bookshelf in Comic 1<sup>4</sup>, which when clicked upon takes you to an extensive variety of books. Work includes a range of academic areas as well as non-academic sources to communicate the disciplinary diversity of experience within the group. Drawing on fields such as verbatim theatre (see Fall, 2013) and composite storytelling (see Willis, 2019; Johnston et al., 2021), we worked with stretches of text from the story circles to create audio-based artefacts. Sarah's<sup>5</sup> story is an example of a monologue created by one of the participants and the PI to capture the former's experience of her PhD viva. The process involved using verbatim extracts from the story circle and interview transcripts to write Sarah's Story, which was then narrated by an actor. Throughout the process, the participant had complete control over how her experience was represented as drafts of the monologue passed back and forth between her and the PI. The process used the 'think-with' method advocated by Watson (2022) as a way to work with concepts to get started with creating sociological fiction. In this case, the concept was that of 'testimonial quieting' (see Dotson, 2011), owing to the participant's feeling her testimony as a doctoral candidate of working-class origins was unrecognised as credible by her examiner/interlocutor. As highlighted throughout this article, this process led us to think about creating the comics as a continuation of understanding, exploring and problematising majoritarian stories representing the lived experiences of AWCH.

Working collectively, we factored in moments of critical reflection in a bid to safeguard against reproducing majoritarian stories we sought to problematise. As researchers, we do not live in a vacuum and can be as captured by the majoritarian discourse as anyone else. CRT researchers have found that the subjects of master narratives often find themselves re-telling majoritarian stories and taking them on as seemingly authentic representations of self. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) state:

We are not developing imaginary characters that engage in fictional scenarios. Instead, the “composite” characters we develop are grounded in real-life experiences and actual empirical data. (p36)

Therefore, at different stages the whole group would meet online in MS Teams to discuss progress with our comics. This provided us with a chance to share the work to ensure the group saw what was being created in the three comics as credible representations of our lived experiences. In these discussions, we also reflected on what types of stories were being told, being sensitive to the aim of the project to extend the possibilities of expression beyond stereotypes of meritocratic heroics or victimhood.

*Narrative encounter and authenticity.* Retaining a sense of authenticity in how our experiences as AWCH were represented concerned us at every juncture of the process. Questions about the factual authenticity of claims can be seen in work discussing comic formats such as comic journalism (see Weber and Rall, 2017). There is a cultural paradox of comics being fictional and journalists (as with researchers) reporting facts. Academic research and journalism share the genre of nonfiction. A comic which draws upon stories from eight academics to create composite stories is culturally paradoxical with the genre of academic research and nonfiction. Genres are social construction but they are powerful discourses in that the academic journal article is seen as more credible than a comic story as knowledge production, exchange and dissemination. As Watson (2022) in her conceptualisation of sociological fiction points out, methodological debates about what is fact and what is not are long and complex. Our work, while acknowledging different viewpoints, was not to contest one perspective as more legitimate than the other. Like Watson (2022: 340), we contend that the approach we took aimed to ‘open multiplicities in what and how we can know about social worlds, and critically centre our motivations for doing such work’. This methodological orientation was aligned with the concept of narrative encounter which is committed to keeping meaning open to the possibilities of shifting interpretations. A motivation for this work was to develop a methodology which created opportunities to explore and represent the complex heterogeneity of becoming an AWCH. It must also be noted that the dialogic process did not end with completion of the project. Dissemination and sharing of the output and methodology has resulted in conversations provoked both by the subject matter of the comics and the method used to create them.

### *Fostering creative opportunities for collective praxis*

This methodological process was a form of praxis. The reflexive practice we enacted throughout the writing and design of the comics is a form of action and counter-narrative grounded in authentic experience. Yagelski (2012) describes writing as praxis:

“...writing is inherently an act of connection. What emerges as we write in the moment is a multifaceted sense of self that is connected, through language, to other selves and to the world we share” (p193)

Similar to the writing as thinking approach discussed by Coles and Thomson (2016), the project created opportunities to make new meanings from the in-between moments created as our stories came into conversation with one another. Burroway et al. (2019) argue from a literary fiction perspective, you can never capture fully an experience or truth but the writing and creation of that story explores, discovers and reveals new insights in the recasting of experiences. Flowers (2017) describe an ethnographic and participatory approach to making comics as meaning making about yourself, others and the environment. This is common with other creative endeavours such as writing, filmmaking etc. Multimedia counter-storytelling is a critical, emancipatory and resistance praxis which shows the links between personal experiences and wider social structures (Goessling, 2018), or as we state above, seeing society as art with landscapes (social structures), portraits (individual experiences) and motion (development and change). It is also a source of sociological imagination for marginalised groups to tell authentic stories about their experiences and to develop resistance and tactics for everyday life (de Certeau, 2013).

The methods discussed in this paper can be used in a variety of research contexts to provide opportunities to problematise and subvert pervasive stories which may misrepresent the heterogeneity of experience among social groups. Participants can work as researchers to co-produce knowledge to extend the possibilities of thinking, knowing and acting. This is achieved through storytelling and listening, through different forms and mediums which act as resistance to majoritarian, master narratives and monovocal stories to add texture and nuance to complex lived experiences and form a critical consciousness (Freire, 1996). Ladson-Billings (2016) sums up a participatory approach to storytelling which allows the individual to reflect and have the vocabulary to give a voice to their experiences and to see how those experiences fit into a wider social structure:

“[T]he story of one’s condition leads to the realization of how one came to be oppressed and subjugated, thus allowing one to stop inflicting mental violence on oneself” (24)

## **Implications for research and practice in education**

This project draws on and contributes to arts-based counter-narrative approaches committed to representing the complex lived experiences of a diverse range of often socially and culturally marginalised people in Academia (see Belluigi and Mestre, 2020 for an example). The work discussed in this article created a space for eight AWCH to collectively produce knowledge about their experiences transitioning into and through higher education.

Academia is imagined as a middle-class space where people of working-class origins are characterised as space invaders owing to their lack of existential and epistemic fit (Puar, 2004). Rather than reinforce stereotypes which produce and are produced by deficit narratives characterising working-class lives as lacking cultural wealth, we sought to problematise them to create generative opportunities to make new meanings.



Through sharing, interrogating and (re)interpreting stories of our lived experiences, we created composite stories in interactive comic formats for audiences within, and beyond academia. As Gauntlett (2018) argues, making is connecting when collaborating on a tangible creative output. In this case, interactive comics forged a collaborative, trusting group ethos. In our project, the approach to co-production removed the barrier between the researcher and the researched (Bell and Pahl, 2018). Embodying an ethos of co-production, the inquiry space pursued egalitarian and democratic principles of participation (Banks et al., 2019). This commitment to collective forms of decision-making influenced every methodological aspect of the study from our first meeting to how our lived experiences were represented.

The ethical dimensions of this study were relational to the situated needs and wants of the participants as the project evolved, meaning aspects such as anonymity were renegotiated (Bussu et al., 2021). For example, as the project progressed, the participants being fully aware of the implications of being made visible, consented to retracting their anonymity. This decision was partly based on having more ownership over the study trajectory and also the comfort in knowing that the composite storytelling approach would lessen the potential of individuals being recognisable from aspects of their experiences (Willis, 2019). However, in creating composite narrative comics, some aspects of individual's stories were left out of the final comics. This poses challenges around decisions about what aspects of whose stories are represented and whose are not. This ethical complexity illustrates that what may seem like practical compromises can raise questions about how equitable and democratic the co-production process is. One potential response to these issues is to ensure, where budget and resource allow, that multiple composites are created. However, regardless of whether this is a possibility, in all projects, expectations around the nature of participation must be discussed from the outset and renegotiated as the study progresses. In doing so, the democratic dimensions of the project can be (re)established to support collective reasoning, shared understanding and agreement on final outputs.

Our work adds to the broadening of our methodological toolbox as researchers in the social sciences. Social class itself is a contested term with many empirical classifications of socio-economic status – our work provides an alternative approach with which to study class and other social stratification. The participants in this study were researchers in their own subject areas across Social Science and Humanities domains. Our familiarity with divergent and convergent methodological, analytical and epistemic traditions offered many advantages. The different theoretical standpoints provided us with interdisciplinary opportunities to expand epistemically beyond the parameters of the research paradigms we were most familiar with. Differences within the group were also rich sources of personal development as we learned from each other through the critical storytelling process (Carmona and Luschen 2014). Given the emotional dissonance revisiting lived experiences may cause, being ethically vigilant is a priority for any work of this nature. Where participants may not be familiar with the procedural and relational ethical dimensions of storytelling approaches, added care is needed to safeguard participants from any undue potential distress caused by the emotional work involved. Ensuring that the methodological and ethical shape of a study is negotiated among participants creates trust and maintains a commitment on behalf of the researcher to work with participants, not on them (Armstrong et al., 2023). For any participatory study, regardless of

who the participants are – academics or not – the continuous renegotiation of trust and the ethical nature of participation needs to be a priority.

### *Contributions to practice*

The publication of academic books or a journal article is often followed by impact work such as conferences, podcasts, blogs, comics etc. Our project, however, reversed this process in that the comics were the initial ‘product’ of our collective inquiry. Through our website<sup>6</sup>, the comics were shared with different audiences from the moment they were completed. Simultaneously, and after the initial sharing, we disseminated the work via seminars, social media, conference presentations, articles such as this and at creative research methods workshops (for example see Davis et al., 2022). The comic format demonstrates the potential to stimulate the interest of different discursive communities by bringing together multimodal methods of representation (Kuttner et al., 2021). Due to the public nature of the outputs, it is difficult to measure the full impact of the project. However, at the point of writing, there are already several examples of how the comics have been utilised in practice:

- The comics have provided opportunities to scaffold understanding of theories and concepts representing the social (re)production of forms of injustice experienced by under-represented social groups. At a university in the Midlands of England the comic, *Navigating the Unknown*<sup>7</sup>, is being used as an enrichment task for MA Education students engaging with Bourdieusian concepts of capital, field and habitus.
- The work has inspired the use of similar comic-based approaches as part of community work in the Midlands of England supporting individuals managing debt<sup>8</sup>. The adaptation of similar creative approaches to addressing themes related to forms of social injustice demonstrates the potential for comic formats to reach wider audiences.
- On a doctoral TESOL course in a Scottish institution, the comics are being used as a resource to introduce students to concepts such as epistemic injustice. This forms part of a compulsory introductory module exploring professional identities through lenses of native-speakerism, intercultural communication and ideas from the social theory of education.
- The work has been incorporated into doctoral programmes at an institution in N. Ireland where there is a focus on arts-based and creative-arts research approaches.
- At a university in the Midlands of England, the comics have been utilised as part of a postgraduate module exploring comparative perspectives on higher education. The module discusses inequalities among students in higher education, with the comics being used to demonstrate that similar inequalities can be found among academic staff.
- The project has been cited in a blog post exploring the impact of generative AI in education (Matthews, 2023), suggesting that drawing on more personal experiences such as story circles and comic production may be a way to draw out the human element of educational activity.

- Less explicitly, the project is feeding into a broader pedagogical development of inclusivity in departmental spaces. In one area of Humanitarian Studies at a university in the North of England, the project has prompted conversations about equity of access to and experience of Humanitarian Studies, a typically middle-class discipline which relies upon free internships and volunteering. This work represents the potential of storytelling approaches to augment other forms of research seeking to influence policy and decision-making processes (Dillon and Craig, 2021).

The examples outlined above show the breadth of current applications, although there are other ways that the project outputs and methodology might be utilised.

### ***Future research***

In future studies, more needs to be done to explore how class intersects with other social identity characteristics such as race and gender to affect the extent to which people from under-represented social groups can flourish as human beings. We need to transcend epistemic standpoints to create moments of solidarity to explore the lived experiences of working-class peoples of different races, faiths, genders and cultural backgrounds. Work by the UK-based Runnymede Trust (see Snoussi and Mompelat, 2019) illustrates, there are powerful privileged forces at play in our society seeking to divide working-class groups along racial and ethnic grounds. However, as the Runnymede Trust states, more needs to be done to provide working-class people with opportunities to have a say in how services affecting their lives are shaped. In future, it is in these working-class spaces, similar approaches to those discussed in this paper can be used to create stories of solidarity and understanding beyond cliché and simplistic narrative tropes.

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## Notes

1. Coming Home – <https://awcht2022.wixsite.com/agnes4awch/coming-home>
2. There were two groups of three people and one group of two people
3. Comic 3, Speaking up and being heard – <https://agnes4awch.itch.io/speaking-up-and-being-heard>
4. The bookshelf from Comic 1: Roots and Routes into Academia – <https://awcht2022.wixsite.com/agnes4awch/penny-s-library>
5. Sarah's story – <https://awcht2022.wixsite.com/agnes4awch/sarah-s-story>
6. Project website – <https://charliedavis5.github.io/AWCHT/Home.html>
7. Navigating the Unknown – <https://agnes4awch.itch.io/navigating-the-unknown>
8. Money Sorted Project – <https://www.connectmore.org.uk/cartoons/>

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**Penny Rivlin**, now retired, is a former lecturer in the School of Media and Communications at the University of Leeds. Penny researched public pedagogy, equity and social justice in higher education and areas of sustainable consumption.

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