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**More Examinations of Invisible  
Labor**

# Composing Reciprocity with Comics

## Composing the Labor in Community-University Partnerships

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When we decided to draw comics about our collaborative partnership—between a college composition class and a high school mythology class—we thought our comics would simply be funny to show other people. But when we dove into the iconography of drawing the situations that uplifted and stymied our partnership development, we started to see the potential of using multimodal reflection to strengthen our community-university partnership. Although our student interactions were a success, there were some nuances about the planning and teaching partnership between us instructors that we hadn't explored before deciding to reflect with comics. There were still issues regarding power dynamics, institutional passing, and emotional labor, for example, that we were too timid to talk about in person. Therefore, our co-constructed comics offered a space to examine these issues without pointing to our weaknesses and discuss them in a generous and non-confrontational way. By engaging in that multimodal space, we became more effective community-university partners for each other, our students, and future collaborations. This essay demonstrates how multimodal reflection contributes to reciprocal community-university partnerships. By reflecting on the extensive labor and communication issues inherent in collaborative partnerships through composing comics, we demonstrated the intricate process of composing reciprocity.

We characterize our co-constructed comics as a form of multimodal reflection. As Cedillo & Elston (2017) explain, “multimodal practices not only facilitate communication; they also transmit values and traditions” (p. 7). Our process of multimodal reflection helped us become stronger community-university partners by uncovering our deeper truths and the values that inform them. Comics position communicative tensions at the forefront while allowing us to capitalize on the creative tensions of multimodal composition. This form of reflection is necessary, in particular, due to the myriad tensions inherent in community-university partnerships.

Responding to the inconsistent institutional validation for concerted efforts and labor in community-university partnerships (Boerngen et al., 2018; Kropp et al., 2015; Miller-Young, 2015), this essay makes visible the invisible labor that's needed to remedy the inhospitable practices that under-develop manifestations of reciprocity (Dostilio et al., 2012) and undervalue community expertise. Ranging from the savior complex (Jagla, 2015) to deficit-framing of community partners (Rosenberg, 2017), community-university partnerships struggle to foster collaborative environments for their stakeholders. In order to cultivate hospitable

environments, this essay argues multimodal reflection through composing comics promotes reciprocity. We use reciprocity as defined by Dostilio et al. (2012), which has three orientations: 1) Exchange - “interchange of benefits, resources, or actions”; 2) Influence - “relational connection that is informed by personal social, and environmental contexts”; and 3) Generativity - “transformation of individual ways of knowing and being or of the systems of which the relationship is a part” (pp. 19-20).

Research on reflection in community engagement places the onus of being critical on the students (Prebel, 2016; Scott, 2004). Instead, we argue that practitioner reflection is a preventive approach that keeps practitioners accountable and prepared. Furthermore, our comics speak to multimodal reflection as viable forms of reflection. The juxtaposition of writing in journals and composing comics represents varying insights. Journal writing may be full of streams of consciousness, grammatically incorrect expressions of emotions. Comics, however, are structured. Comics as multimodal reflection are created through creative, distilled synthesis. The play with multimodality influences the ability “to make and negotiate meaning” (Shipka, 2016, p. 251). Limited by the number of panels, the white space, and the icons (McCloud, 1993), composing comics enhances reflection practices because it encourages composers to slow down and “consider the power of their rhetorical productions” (Sealey-Morris, 2015, p. 48). Each panel serves as an intentional point in the narrative, and the rhetorical power of distilling whole experiences into comic panels is a product of rhetorical reflection.

Additionally, as we reflect by composing comics, we construct our community-university partnership identities and “shape [our] own realities” with regards to how we envision reciprocal partnerships to look like (Thomson, 2018, p. 54). With each panel, we actively compose ourselves to be more effective practitioners. Coupling the reflective power of composing comics (Bahl, 2015; Sealey-Morris, 2015; Thomson, 2018) and the overwhelming need for effective practitioner reflection practices, we compose reciprocity by composing comics, and become more informed partners for each other. Underlying our multimodal reflection process, we ask: To what extent do co-constructed practitioner comic reflections promote reciprocity in community-university partnerships?

### **A Wildcat Writers Partnership**

Before introducing the process of composing our rhetorical comics, we should explain our current community-university partnership. We are Wildcat Writers partners, a community writing program out of the Department of English at the University of Arizona. Wildcat Writers pairs university writing composition classrooms with Title I Southern Arizona high school classrooms. Together, we co-designed a curriculum that partners Max’s high school students and Charisse’s university students for a collaborative project. Our students worked together to explore the visual rhetoric of comics, and to co-construct original comics about a learning experience they had in the past. We had three student interactions:

1. High School Comics Workshop
2. High School Online Peer Review
3. University Gallery Walk

The first student interaction—High School Comics Workshop—consisted of the university class synthesizing two chapters of Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* into an interactive presentation about iconography. The interactive presentation was facilitated by university students to high school students. The second student interaction—High School Online Peer Review—consisted of high school students taking what they had learned from the comics workshop and applying that knowledge of iconography and panel to panel transitions (McCloud, 1993) to a peer review of original comics drawn by university students. University students revised their comics based on the high school students’ feedback in preparation for the university gallery walk. The third and last event—University Gallery Walk—was the culmination of the collaborative efforts of the past semester and consisted of high school students coming to the university to view and comment on the final products of the university students’ original comics. Both students asked each other questions about the comic drawing and revision processes.

We planned this collaboration six months before the first student interaction. Sharing every thought and resource in a shared Google document kept us accountable and prepared for the coming semester. Despite some issues with the student interactions—explained through comics below—we had a fairly successful semester where students relied on each other, exchanged insight on comics, and created something outside of their classroom. Considering the success of the student partnership, we decided to reflect on our own planning and teaching partnership using comics. We chose to reflect with comics after the three main student interactions to grow closer as community-university partners, own up to our partnership strengths and weaknesses, and strengthen our collaborative give and take.

### **Insider-Outsider Roles as Assets**

Our marginalized identities as insiders and outsiders of our respective communities (Collins, 1986) have greatly influenced the way we approach this reflection. Looking specifically at power dynamics between a university instructor and a high school teacher, Charisse (university instructor) is an:

- Insider to university life
- Outsider to public education
- Insider to community-university partnerships (main research specialization)

Looking at Max’s (high school teacher) insider and outsider roles, Max is an:

- Outsider to university life
- Insider to public education
- Outsider to community-university partnerships and Wildcat Writers

Additionally, we are both outsiders to teaching visual rhetorics of comics, making the partnership interesting. We contribute in different ways: Max with pedagogy and experience, Charisse with resources and research.

Furthermore, we've confronted the concept of institutional passing (Ahmed, 2017). Max expressed feelings for not passing in the university space, describing "availability of comfort for some bodies may depend on the labor of others, and the burden of concealment" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 123). The labor Max describes speaks to the invisible and extensive emotional labor that community-university practitioners experience when their institutions do not validate their efforts (Correia et al., 2010). While Wildcat Writers is grounded in the community-university partnership, it is still very entrenched in the university. All the professional development events are held at the university and the advisory board consists mostly of university graduate students. Due to the heavy emphasis on the university, Max is more of an outsider in this partnership than Charisse. Therefore, Max harbors a larger burden—and thus performs the necessary invisible and emotional labor—to embody norms of the university. Due to Max's unique positionality as *in* the community, his insights into our partnership are an "asset for community engagement" (Shah, 2020, p. 25), reinforcing our decision to co-author this essay. To confront issues in the partnership, both our voices serve as validated and recognized assets in its development.

### **Community-University Partnership Comics**

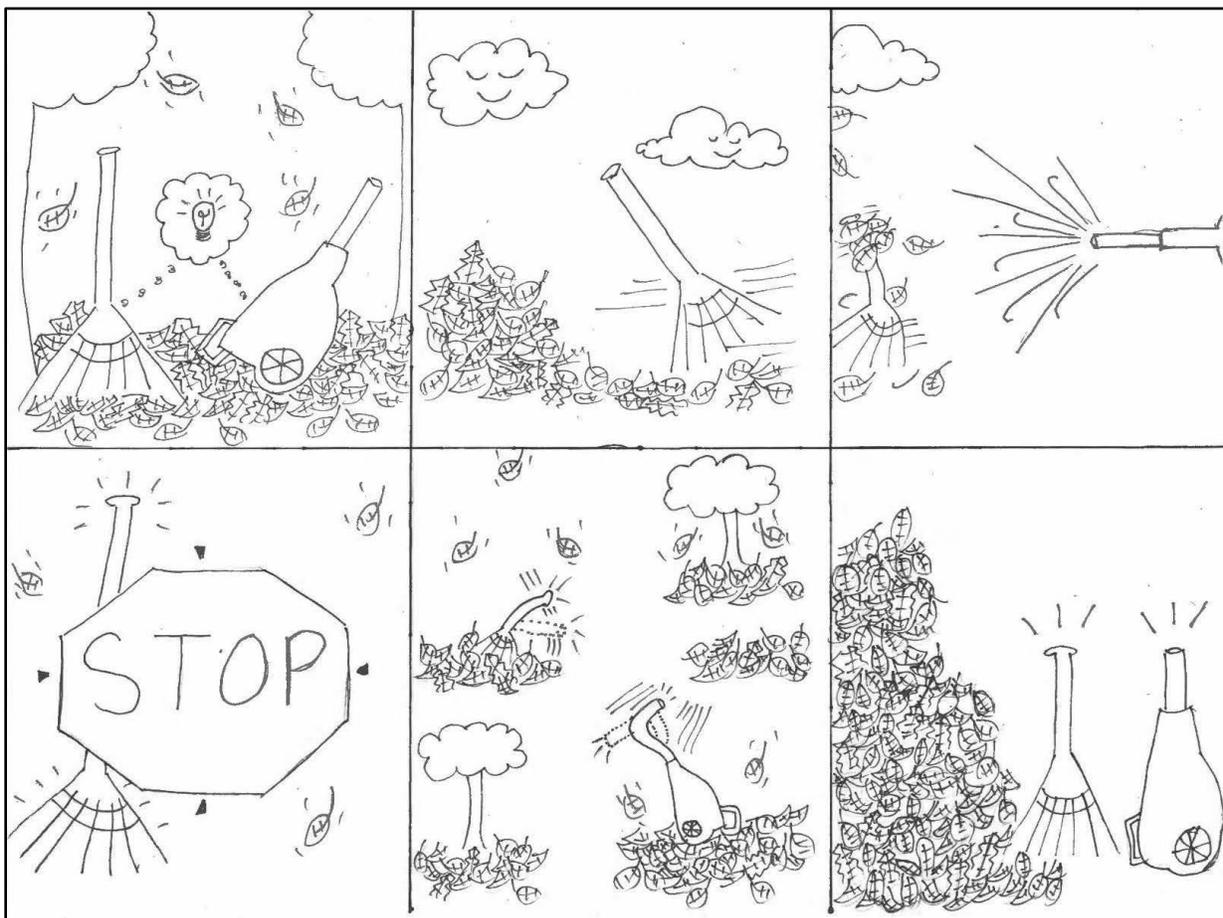
We present a series of comics that illustrate our collaborative analysis of communicative and curricular intentions. We indulge in the genre conventions of comics to disclose our strengths and weaknesses, and reveal how we overcame conflicts through hospitable, fruitful reflection. Moreover, we use both written and comic narrative to demonstrate the complementary, explanatory, and reinforcing effects of multimodal reflection on composing reciprocity. We agreed on the following five restrictions to streamline the composing process:

1. Use only six panels per comic strip that are all the same size to focus more on content than form.
2. Draw animals or inanimate objects to increase universality (McCloud, 1993). Anyone can associate with an animal or an inanimate object because it does not look like any kind of person, thus reflecting many perspectives.
3. Use no color to, again, focus more on content than design.
4. Use a limited amount of words to avoid relying on words to move the story forward. Rather, we could rely on other icons (McCloud, 1993) to move the story forward.
5. Keep the comics simple to demonstrate that anyone can co-create meaning.

Noting the stated restrictions, we decided that each comic would address one communication conflict that occurred in our partnership, and discussed what iconography would be most appropriate to represent each other and the conflict. Charisse served as the primary artist with first and revised drafts. Max served as the primary reviewer, explaining how the iconography could be revised to best represent us. By structuring the composing process this way, we relied on each other for our respective expertise. After a round of peer review and revision, we

discussed the conflict more in depth, highlighting the concepts that may have caused the conflict in the first place (i.e., savior complex, ivory tower intimidation, lack of resources, cultural differences, etc.). Afterward, we planned to avoid similar situations in the future. This process is an example of composing reciprocity through multimodal reflection. Using the definition of reciprocity provided in Dostilio et al. (2012), we *exchanged* ideas of what could be improved in our community-university partnership. Charisse's initial drawing of the comics *influenced* how Max peer reviewed, and Max's feedback *influenced* how Charisse revised. Together, we *generated* a nuanced perspective of our partnership, ultimately refining how we work together. We intended to represent a collaborative meaning making process that benefits us both. The following five comics represent some of the conflicts we encountered. Below each comic, we provide narrative commentary and demonstrate how each comic composes reciprocity (Dostilio et al., 2012).

### Comic 1: Implementation Methods Misaligned



**Panel 1:** The rake and leaf blower encounter a mess of leaves and hope to clean it.

**Panel 2:** The rake gathers the leaves in a pile.

**Panel 3:** The leaf blower blows the rake's pile of leaves.

**Panel 4:** The rake says, "STOP!" to the leaf blower.

**Panel 5:** *The rake and leaf blower look at the mess they've made.*

**Panel 6:** *The partnership leads to all the leaves in one pile.*

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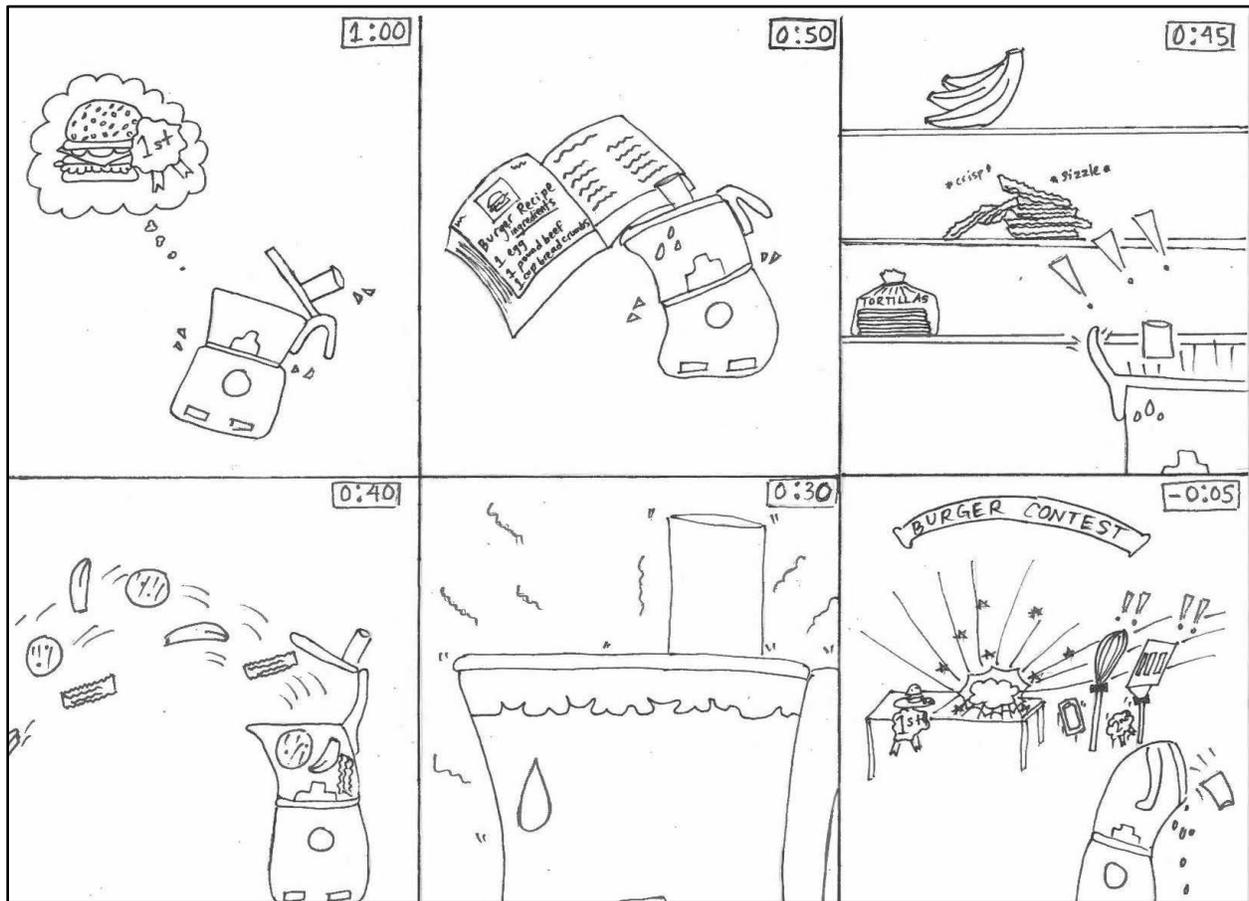
**Charisse:** *My goal for this set of comics is to be relatable to both you and me, both university and community (high school) partner. So we're both the rake and the leaf blower, but at different times. This particular comic is a comment on our peer review fiasco, and communicates the following theme: we identified authentic needs of our respective people, but the implementation was not aligned. I know the peer review wasn't really a fiasco, but the comic is supposed to communicate the varying power dynamics/assumptions we had with the peer review. An initial interpretation is the leaf blower (me) has the "ivory tower-more education" role and assumes she covered a discussion of constructive v. destructive feedback, but did not. A secondary interpretation is the leaf blower (you) assumes his students knows how to peer review (the way I expect) without explicit instruction. Then there's also the offensive remarks and reaction of our students to bring it full circle. Like I said, I like that both of us could relate to both characters. Drawing the comic after the event reinforces our collaborative problem solving to avoid future occurrences.*

**Max:** *After reading your commentary, the comic makes complete sense. Initially, I thought I was being implicated as a kind of bludgeon in our relationship and took a defensive stance. This is precisely, however, the result of my own issues with the academy and, ultimately, I was perceiving you as the leaf blower. It is very reassuring that you acknowledged how part of the impasse was the ivory tower vs. the mean streets aspects of our relative positions in education. From a rhetorical standpoint, your panels and iconography are smooth and aptly clever. Instead of us "competing" to fulfill each other's roles and inadvertently creating an uneven power dynamic, we should seek to complement and enhance each other's skills and success in our respective domains. Furthermore, we should not presume that we know each other's perspectives and how we work with our students, but, rather, develop clear procedures based on our initial experiences with the peer review.*

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This comic is titled, "Implementation Methods Misaligned" in response to the High School Online Peer Review in which the high school students reviewed the university students' original comics. As explained in the narrative commentary, we agreed on an online peer review, but no expectation of *how* to conduct it was stated clearly. As a result, some high school students were harsher than the university students expected. This resulted in a conflict where university students described high school students as *disrespectful*, and high school students described university students as *too soft*. "Implementation Methods Misaligned" is an example of composing reciprocity (Dostilio et al., 2012) because we *exchanged* knowledge: Charisse drew the initial and revised comic, and Max offered feedback on how to improve the iconography to best reflect our partnership; we *influenced* the construction of the revised comic by reflecting on how our respective students felt about the interaction; and we *generated* lively and productive discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of the partnership, which enabled us to plan proactively to avoid tricky interactions in the future.

### Comic 2: Scrambling to Get the "Right" Resources



**Panel 1:** The food processor hopes to win first place in the burger making contest.

**Panel 2:** The food processor reads a burger recipe from a recipe book.

**Panel 3:** The food processor panics because the ingredients in the pantry do not match the ingredients in the burger recipe.

**Panel 4:** The food processor runs out of time and includes all the ingredients available.

**Panel 5:** The food processor is nervous to see how its burger recipe turns out.

**Panel 6:** The food processor is sad because its burger blew up during the judging.

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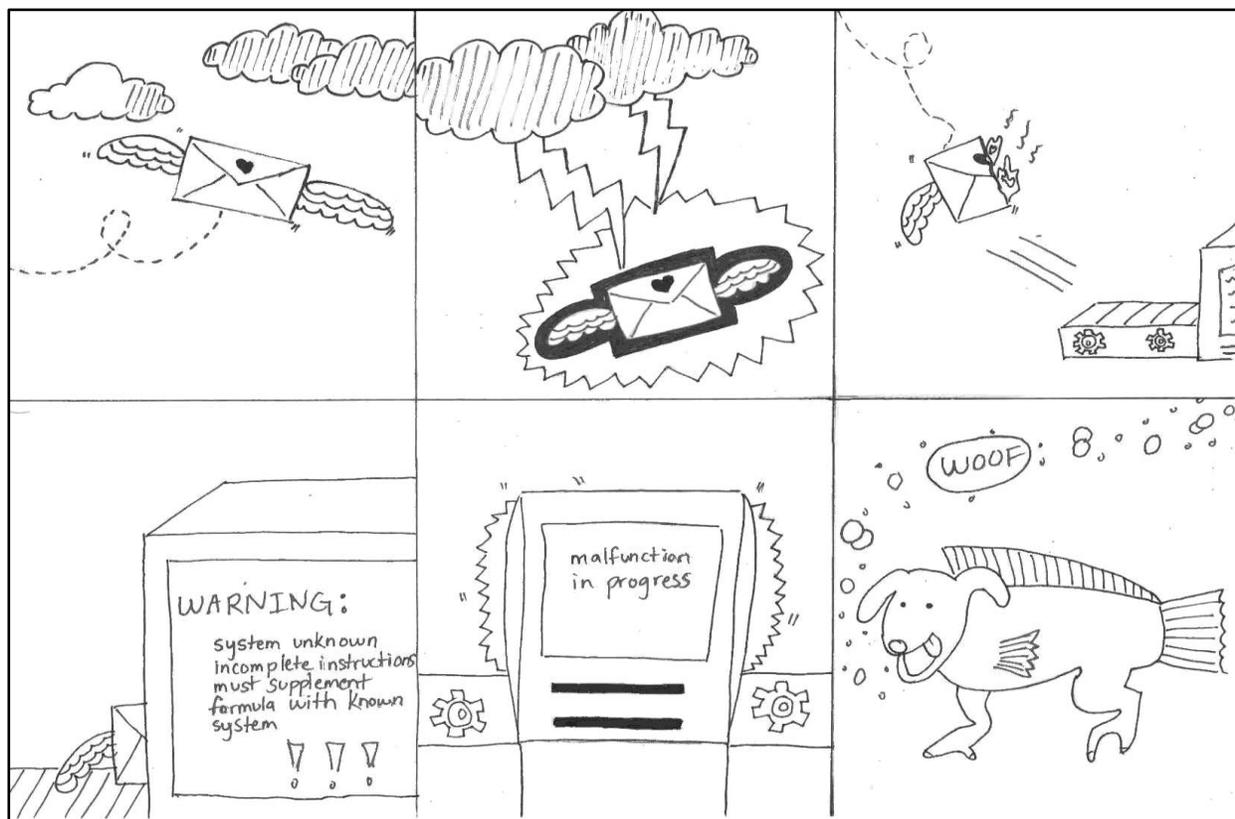
**Charisse:** This comic represents a scrambling to gather the "right" or appropriate resources before starting and during the semester. Even though I've taught comics in past semesters, I always feel unprepared. I was rushing to find the best YouTube tutorials on visual rhetoric, rushing to teach both comics and public speaking skills for the comics workshop in your classroom, etc. And I think this applies to you, too, especially as a public school teacher. Obviously, this is not to mean our partnership or teaching abilities are terrible. It's more of a comment on the invisible labor we take on and the training and institutional support we don't receive to experiment with different pedagogical strategies.

**Max:** The iconography and panel transitions were easy to follow in this comic. I think that this is a great illustration of how careful plans often have unintended, if not "explosive" results. We tried to think of everything, but some things, like taking for granted that my high school students would be positive with your students in initial phases of the partnership, which lead to some uproar from the college kids. Also, even though everything went according to plan for the most part after that, I was way more stressed and anxious about the partnership and field trip than was appropriate. Ultimately, although last semester was chaotic, in the end things worked out and our collaboration was natural and easy.

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This comic, "Scrambling to Get the 'Right' Resources" reacts to the invisible and emotional labor we took on to plan the most appropriate joint curriculum. We were fairly new to working with communities outside our schools, which heightened the anxiety we felt before and throughout the semester. "Scrambling to Get the 'Right' Resources" is an example of composing reciprocity (Dostilio et al., 2012) because we *exchanged* teaching resources on visual rhetoric including books, PDFs, YouTube videos, and sample comics; we *influenced* each other's pedagogical practices by being counterweights to each other—for example, Charisse tends to be more meticulous, and Max tends to take a more relaxed stance—meaning we balanced each other's strengths and weaknesses by offering advice and quelling fears; and we *generated* an engaging visual rhetoric unit to use again.

### Comic 3: Miscommunication



**Panel 1:** A letter is being sent to someone.

**Panel 2:** The letter is struck by lightning.

**Panel 3:** Only half of the letter reached the processing center.

**Panel 4:** The processor struggles to process the half message and supplements the incomplete message with another message.

**Panel 5:** The processor works hard to complete the message.

**Panel 6:** The result of the incomplete message processing is a fish-dog-chicken.

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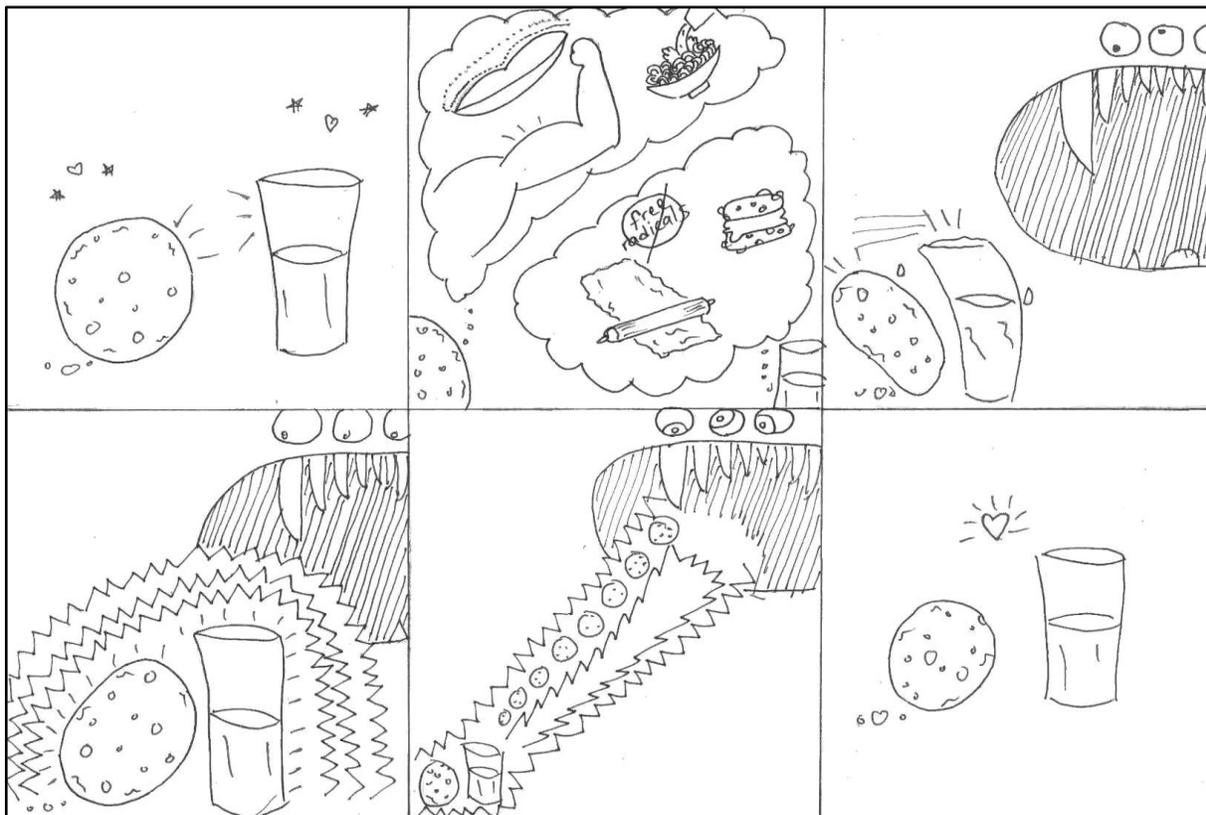
**Charisse:** It's about miscommunication. Funnily enough, this was the easiest to draw, probably because I've visualized similarly disastrous results of my miscommunications. Thankfully we vibe well to get over our miscommunication fairly quickly. The message gets cut off from some factor, either through language or external factors or misremembering. And the result is some disaster.

**Max:** Important aspects of our communication sometimes slip through the cracks. It seems like a kind of act of god in your comic (the lightning striking the letter), but it is me, for example, confusing the letter with "junk mail" and mistakenly ignoring or misremembering the communication. The coolest thing about this comic is that it results in the dogfish, which is alarmingly cute and friendly. For me, this represents the oddly functional situation that was born from the miscommunication, how the field trip and student interactions, in the end, gave birth to something that was unique and, oddly, fun (I hope you feel the same).

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"Miscommunication" explains our interactions after the High School Online Peer Review. We handled the reactions of our students poorly and blamed each other. We recovered quickly, thankfully, but that reaction after the incident could have been a negative turning point. "Miscommunication" is an example of composing reciprocity (Dostilio et al., 2012) because we exchanged words of blame; we influenced the way we recovered from the incident by remembering why we partnered in the first place: we had a solid rapport and many shared interests; and we generated a solution to fix the peer review problem for the next semester.

### Comic 4: Expertise Assumptions



**Panel 1:** The milk and cookie are in awe of each other.

**Panel 2:** The milk thinks of all the benefits that chocolate has, and the cookie thinks of all the benefits that milk has.

**Panel 3:** The milk and cookie encounter a problem.

**Panel 4:** The milk and cookie power up together to face the problem.

**Panel 5:** The milk and cookie use their joint powers to destroy the problem.

**Panel 6:** The milk and cookie are happy they helped each other.

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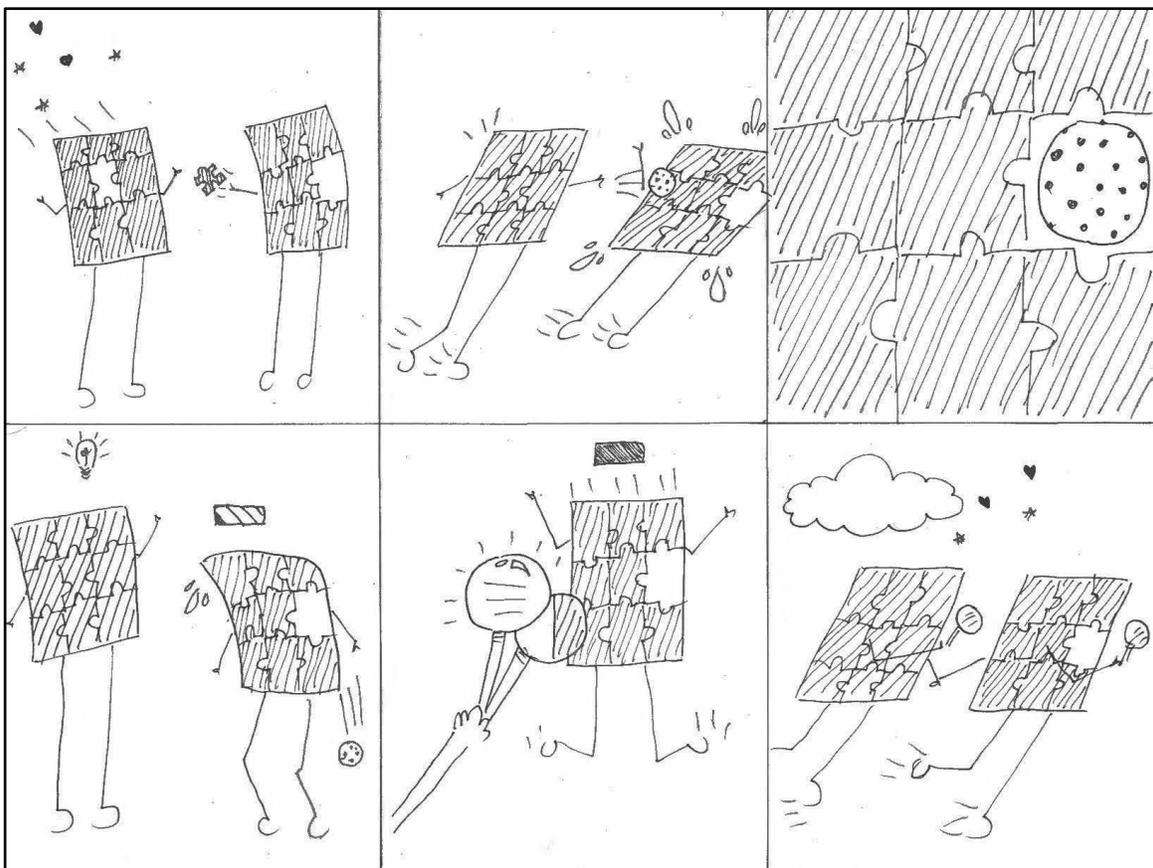
**Charisse:** It represents assumptions about expertise. We both have assumptions about each other regarding our positions and age and whatnot. Assumptions about visual rhetoric expertise and behavior management expertise. While we may think the other can do a better job at some task, together we work really well together to solve problems. Also, there was a discomfort about not wanting to step on each other's toes because we know better. For example, not only do you not assign a lot of writing in your mythology class, you also do not talk about the mechanics of writing (i.e., peer review, revision, drafting, etc.). That posed a challenge to our partnership regarding my obligation to remind you to teach your students about core writing concepts so our classes could collaborate successfully.

**Max:** This is my favorite comic because it illustrates our (successful?) partnership. The monster represents the perceived enormity of our task: to bring our populations together subjectively and physically in order to benefit the community. Interestingly, our ability to work together is the result of the implicit understanding between us—as we puzzle over what we each are able to do and make an effort to retain confidence in one another, when faced with the ultimate challenge, we automatically knew what to do.

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“Expertise Assumptions” explores our initial perceptions of each other. The assumptions made about Max as a high school teacher were his supposed expertise in behavior management, curriculum design, and time management. The assumptions made about Charisse were her comic artistry, institutional resources, and visual rhetoric knowledge. “Expertise Assumptions” is an example of composing reciprocity (Dostilio et al., 2012) because we *exchanged* teaching strategies and resources on comics; we *influenced* how each of us perceived the other’s profession; and we *generated* a protocol to avoid making assumptions about each other’s work.

### Comic 5: Knowledge Exchange



**Panel 1:** The right puzzle helps complete the left puzzle with a missing puzzle piece.

**Panel 2:** The left puzzle is appreciative so tries to force a circle piece into the right puzzle.

**Panel 3:** A close-up of the right puzzle shows the circle piece is not the right fit.

**Panel 4:** The left puzzle sees the right puzzle in distress and has an idea.

**Panel 5:** The left puzzle offers magnifying glasses to the right puzzle.

**Panel 6:** The right and left puzzle use the magnifying glasses to search for the right puzzle's missing piece together.

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**Charisse:** It's about not being prepared for a knowledge exchange. For example, you might solve a problem I have about behavior management. Then I try to solve one of your problems about...attendance or whatever. But you don't like the solution. It just doesn't fit with your classroom demographic or your teaching style. So instead, we opt to find a solution together, something we can find together.

**Max:** Am I correct that as we try to supply each other with solutions we make presumptions about each others' situations that miss the mark—we need to stop and pay closer attention to the basic differences between our relative academic situations, audiences, and knowledge we bring to the table? Are magnifying glasses we use in the end indicative of how we ultimately stopped, acknowledged the problems, and paid closer attention to what we were doing, especially when it came to the differences between our students?

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“Knowledge Exchange” delves into the confusion of teaching each other’s students. Max is a trained high school teacher at a Title I school, and Charisse is a fairly new graduate teaching instructor to mostly White, middle class students. We offered resources to each other, but the implementation of teaching those resources differed based on the learning demographic. “Knowledge Exchange” is an example of composing reciprocity (Dostilio et al., 2012) because we *exchanged* knowledge on how our student demographics differed; we *influenced* our perceptions of those student demographics through stories and class observations; and we *generated* a protocol for ensuring collaborative lesson plans met the needs of each student group and our teaching styles.

### **Composing Comics as Rhetorical Acts of Composing Reciprocity**

Our comics composing was rhetorical on two levels. On the first level, the comics are a form of rhetorical meaning making. The restrictions we imposed on our drawing and revising processes forced us to reflect on our strengths and weaknesses in only six panels. We condensed the narrative of our experiences using the rhetoric of icons by distilling entire experiences and prioritized what was most important to convey. Despite being limited in space, the panel limitation encouraged us to be resourceful with our available tools.

On the second level, our comics are rhetorical because we composed reciprocity. We critiqued the comics over our partnership. That gracious shift repositioned the focus from ourselves to the comics, and we were constructive toward the work rather than destructive to our weaknesses. Dostilio et al. (2012) outlines exchange, influence, and generativity as three

orientations *into* reciprocity. Through each comic draft, review, and revision, we accessed those orientations to achieve reciprocity. We showed the intricacies behind composing reciprocity through multimodal reflection so other practitioners could take on the labor necessary and compose reciprocity in their own partnerships. Moreover, Max expressed a deeper connection to Charisse’s perspective of the partnership after viewing initial comic drafts due to the comic representing a carefully thought-out reaction of the partnership. Max learned more about Charisse from reviewing the initial comic drafts than if he had reviewed Charisse’s written reflections. After viewing the final revisions, we dissociated from critiquing the comics and connected the conflict in the comics to our real-life experiences. This resulted in bringing us closer as partners, and discovering how our values align for future collaborations. Multimodal reflection is rhetorical on several levels, and accessing those levels could prove fruitful to understanding how reciprocity is achieved.

### **Continuing Rhetorical Reflection Practices**

Multimodal reflection practices could be used in different spaces and with different partners the same way partners reflect using writing. Composing comics is not for everyone, but we chose comics due to our similar interests and our collaborative student projects. We teach our students how to navigate multimodal genres in response to their multiple intelligences, “difference and communicative diversity,” and to a growing technological age (Shipka, 2016, p. 256). Consequently, it is equally important for teachers and practitioners to play with different genres as well. By working outside of our comfort zones and redefining how we approach reflection, we became better researchers and practitioners. We became more critical, engaged, and resourceful.

The purpose of this essay was to demonstrate how our comics were rhetorical acts of composing reciprocity—calling for “linguistic codes to combine, often unexpectedly and in a single composition, to fulfill rhetorical purposes”—and to promote means of reflection beyond written reflection (Jordan, 2015, p. 365). Additionally, we aimed to develop more accounts of instructors as they “learn and develop as teachers” (Leon, 2017, p. 39). By developing successful accounts of practitioners composing reciprocity through multimodal reflection, we shed light on the efforts that reciprocity requires. We hope these accounts inspire institutions to support the labor of cultivating reciprocal community-university partnerships through evaluations, funding, and resources. Our goal is to continue creating knowledge with community and university partners to further de-center traditional means of meaning making, and to further bridge the community and university.

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