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Rural and Native American Students' Utilization of Autobiographical Comic Strips to Explore Their Identities through Digital Storytelling in the Multimodal Writing Classroom

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In the writing classroom, presenting a curriculum in which students read and create comic strips in order to explore their identity, via the course design, represents a strategy that has grown in popularity. Yet, for teachers and writing program administrators, what are the benefits and drawbacks in asking students to interact with graphic novels and comic books and to fashion autobiographical, digital, comic-strip narratives as a rhetorical construction of their identity? How does implementing multimodal assignments and digital storytelling practices by generating narrative comic strips affect students' reading, writing, critical thinking, research, collaborative, and other related processes as writing course outcomes? This article discusses a case study at a rural, Southwestern university of an experimental unit assignment involving 60 students, including many rural students and Native Americans. Students engaged with graphic novels and comic books in an upper-division, Written and Visual Media class. This article includes a description of the first assignment, a comic strip and corresponding reflective essay, as well as the comic's assessment criteria, with raters measuring students' writing outcomes. To compose their comics, students utilized the Pixton company's digital, comic-generating program. Overall, employing digital storytelling practices in creating autobiographical comic strips provided students with a cohesive, relevant approach to the course's overarching multimodal writing curriculum by assisting them in developing and formatting their comics together; contemplating and composing about diverse spaces, people, and histories related to their backgrounds, majors, and futures; and communicating their work to a greater audience. The study's results have implications for reading and generating digital comic strips in multimodal writing classes in enacting a critical multimodal literacy.

Today, the range of comic book writers and their topics has grown more diverse. Nonetheless, Native Americans remain the most stereotyped racial group, with their images and depictions appropriated for various media, including comics (Aurylaite, 2015), where tribal characters are cast as “sidekicks and caricatures” (Kamerick, 2017).¹ In the United States, there are more than 560 federally recognized tribes (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018), yet many comic creators rely on pan-“Indian” or generic representations of Native American characters located in either Western or historical settings² (Noori, 2010; Sheyahshe, 2008; Stedman, 1982) and portrayed as being either noble or savage, drunk, and featuring a “loincloth, feathered headdress, and truncated vocabulary” (Royal, 2010). Contrastingly, in the state of Oklahoma and surrounding territories, the Choctaw Nation describes its people as “a tribe of artists, professionals, musicians, storytellers, innovators, leaders, athletes, warriors, and caregivers” (Choctaw Nation, 2018),³ and from the time of America’s Civil Rights era, the Choctaws have committed to remembering their historical heritage (Howard & Levine, 1990).

In conducting a study and teaching at an Oklahoma university serving rural and Native American populations, I decided that students would produce a comic strip about their identity as the initial unit assignment for the upper-level course, “Written and Visual Media.” Along with reading comics and graphic novels, students would fashion a comic strip in order to engage in class interactions; compose a written and visual media text introducing them in a personal, diverting manner to fashioning work based upon their experiences; and employ storytelling as an artistic, communicative forum for their worldviews and circumstances. The last objective’s fulfillment, I foresaw, would interest English majors familiar with the story genre’s typology, including fiction and nonfiction writers, and some Native American students who had expressed their enjoyment and knowledge of storytelling.

Because graphic novels possess their own language, grammatical structures, and conventions in combining words and pictures to formulate a story (Rothschild, 1995), engaging them is consistent with employing multimodal literacies (Chu & Coffey, 2015; Comer, 2015; Jacobs,

¹ For instance, see C. Richard King (2009), Cornel Pewewardy (2002), and Michael Sheyahshe (2008) for discussions of Native American representations in comics.

² Comparably, in a presentation, area Choctaw and children’s book writer, Tim Tingle, claimed that most pictures of Native Americans today are ones of those “dead,” and the pictures may also depict scenes from the 1800s. In the kindergarten through twelfth grade classrooms Tingle has visited as a speaker, he explained further, he found no representations of living or recent Native Americans framed in pictures as “role models.” Thus, Tingle implored, Native Americans, including college students, must tell stories about themselves, including current depictions of themselves, in order to share their identities with a larger audience.

³ In an advertisement by the National Congress of American Indians, reacting to the Washington [R-----] football team’s refusal to change its name, Native Americans describe themselves as being parents, children, and a “forgotten” people, who are “struggling” but remain “resilient.” While Native Americans utilize many names for themselves, they do not refer to themselves by this slur.

2013; Kress & Jewitt, 2003) in order to tell discuss media topics (Watts, 2015); critique stereotypes (Horn, 2010; Short & Reeves, 2009); detect racism (Chaney, 2010; Schieble, 2014); and present cases of conflict, struggle, and injustice (Versaci, 2010; Yildirim, 2013; Watts, 2015) and other complicated stories via a limited number of frames (Watts, 2015). Indeed, comics and graphic novels provide voices for minority authors and those with alternative viewpoints, as well as giving student writers opportunities to delve into subjects connected to their gender, race, family, and community as subjects that they might resist covering in other educational settings (Lavery, 2018; Watts, 2015). As components related to my course's larger structure, reading comics can assist students' comprehension and synthesis of information, including literary selections (Webb & Guisand, 2007), while producing comics supports students' intellectual, social, cultural, and cognitive skills; promotes engagement with multimodal texts generally; undergirds peer collaborations; and ignites creativity (Cary, 2004; Chun, 2009; Jacobs, 2013; Yildirim, 2013).

To propel students, including Choctaws defining themselves as "artists," "storytellers," and "innovators," to depict a facet of their identity, I assigned a comic utilizing Pixton's digital program. By generating autobiographical comics, authors can foreground their culture and upbringing (Downey, 2009),⁴ and by employing pictorial and written digital formats, students can illustrate their relationship with their greater community as an oppositional maneuver against having their representations assumed by others (see Kamerick, 2017). Of available applications, Torrey Truth and university staff argue that implementing Pixton to create comics as a "learner-centered tool . . . allows students to construct their own knowledge and display it in a [significant] way" (Truth, 2018). Likewise, in formulating comics via Pixton, students can collaborate in composing work; utilize their comics in discussing course readings; and define how they can employ the comic genre's attributes in communicating their personalities, families, and circumstances with future academic and outside audiences (Appling, Weaver, & Lay, 2009).

This article discusses a two-year, case study of a "Written and Visual Media" class, and it explores a comic strip and reflective essay unit and their assessment as a mechanism by which students might establish a positive self-representation (see Henzi, 2016; Sheyahshe, 2008). With the study, I posed these research questions: How does foregrounding multimodal reading and writing assignments, including an autobiographical comic strip with a digital storytelling emphasis, affect students' critical thinking, research, collaborative, and multimodal reading and writing outcomes in enacting a critical multimodal literacy? Would students, including Native Americans, benefit from the comic assignment's identity-related, multimodal, and reflective focus, or would the potentially negative consequences include their inability to connect with comics and identity topics?

⁴ Sousanis explains that through the composing of comics, "not only space, but time and experience too, have been put into boxes" (2015, p. 10).

The Institutional Context and a Literature Review

Oftentimes, teachers' curricula fail to meet tribal students' needs by recognizing their backgrounds and native knowledge constructs (see Munroe, Borden, & Orr, 2013; Shotton, Oosahwe, & Cintron, 2007), yet instructors must tailor their curricula to meet their students' specific preferences, as opposed to simply reflecting Western educational styles and strategies (Fletcher, 2008). To succeed, Native American students require an institution that values their identity (Mosholder, Waite, Larsen, & Goslin, 2016), as well as opportunities to interact with and instruct their peers and implement their favored learning styles (Conley & Bryan, 2009), a scenario that potentially might include students' reading, fashioning, and sharing of comics. When tribal college students feel confident about employing their customary skill sets in fulfilling academic tasks, they perform better (Guillory, 2009), and scholars who discuss featuring comics as part of high-school and college students' curricular subjects delineate positive outcomes for both groups. In one study involving a high school, Native American students collaborated to generate graphic novels as a task that raised their sense of course investment, promoted multimodal learning, and led them to understand that by sharing their cultural backgrounds, they could combat stereotypes (Brown & Begoray, 2017). Likewise, in studies of college students, those enrolled in an advanced composition course covered the graphic memoir's genre and composed comics to raise their class participation and rhetorical meaning-making levels, and engagement with critical multiliteracies (Comer, 2015), while students in a literature course undertook literary analyses of comics and graphic novels and generated comics for outside audiences to practice multimodal composition processes reliant on their analytical, persuasive, and organizational skills (Misemer, 2015).

In teaching "Written and Visual Media," I focus on students' attainment of written, visual, and digital literacies required for advanced composition purposes, and I adopted principles for instructing tribal students and employing comics by designating my first assignment as a comic denoting some aspect of students' identities (see Delpit, 1995) that they desired to share for civic engagement purposes (see Deer, 2013). At my locale, many Native American students require distinct curricular formats and assignments in order to thrive and make their voices heard (see Bowman, 2018), and comics assist students in communicating in authentic, meaningful ways (Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002) as students reference important topics, experiences, and places for themselves of racial and cultural concern (Battiste, 2013). Studying and creating comics are beneficial practices for students whose learning style is visual-verbal, too (Short & Reeves, 2009), including those from area tribal cultures valuing pictorial and oral communication styles. Likewise, comics draw interest from reluctant readers (Downey, 2009), which could represent students from the study's nearby, low-rated

schools.⁵ Largely, by reading and generating comics⁶ in the college writing classroom, students can investigate both the traditional (see New London Group, 1996)⁷ and visual literacy practices (see Kress, 2003; Kress & Lewewen, 2001) attached to all multimodal texts (Jacobs, 2007a; Jacobs, 2013).

In delineating my comic unit's objectives, I wished to instigate class interactions; introduce students to composing texts with written and visual media elements in a personal, diverting way (see Conley & Bryan, 2009) that was reliant on their experiences (see Battiste, 2013) instead of an intensive research component, and foreground storytelling as a forum for students, including the tribally affiliated, to communicate their worldviews (see Munroe, Borden, & Orr, 2013). As my first goal, I wished to promote class dialogues providing an avenue for me, the teacher, to understand students, as well as for them to build peer relationships, since Native students require tribal mentors and a community of learners' support (Fletcher, 2008). As practices contributing to classroom exchanges, during the unit, students would participate in discussions, collaborate in groups, and peer review one another's drafts. Even as tribal cultures are diverse and unique (2008), formulating cohort relationships based upon common subjects, building community, sharing power, and orchestrating a constructive relationship with one's locale are valuable practices for Native American students (Cajete, 2005; Espino & Lee, 2011; Shotton, Oosahwe, & Cintron, 2007), including those within my area. Although the local culture is welcoming, most students live off campus and divide their attention amongst attending college fulltime, which could entail driving up to an-hour-and-a-half one way; working 40 or more hours weekly; raising their families, with students boasting up to eight children⁸; and acting as caretakers for their extended families. Because students keep busy, with the first unit involving a comic concerning one's identity, I hoped to assist members in acknowledging their commonalities, a circumstance that might prompt greater student collaborations from the outset.

⁵ One student tells about growing up in a household with only one book, *The Bible*, a valued text. Her parents had no newspaper subscription. Indeed, the nearest town with a newspaper was two hours away. Consequently, five area families shared a paper, with one person making the weekly trip to the gas station 20 miles away to purchase it. The first neighbor would read and pass the newspaper along the line to the families. Sometimes the comics "went missing," as one could wrap presents in them. Indeed, the student's great-grandmother joked to her, until the 1960s, the comics section had three important functions, with its last being toilet paper.

⁶ While Scott McCloud contrasts cartoons as "an approach to picture-making" with comics, which utilize a cartooning approach via "amplification through simplification" (1994), I utilize these terms interchangeably as do other scholars referenced in this paper. Additionally, Hillary Chute employs the term "graphic narrative" (2008). Indeed, on this topic, Charles Hatfield portrays the difficulty in defining comics and graphic novels in academia (2009).

⁷ The NCTE defines "traditional literacy" in *Standards for the English Language Arts* (2009), while Carol Westby calls "traditional literacy" the "reading and writing of printed texts" (2010, p. 65).

⁸ The number of persons, averaging 3.41, in Native American families is greater than the national rate (U.S. Census, 2012).

As my second priority in employing the comic assignment, I wanted to address English majors who did not enjoy integrating multimodal elements into their work. Prior to enrolling, one student expressed that he had “avoided” multimodal textual configurations “entirely.” Still, comics combine pictorial images with alphabetical text; are read non-linearly; and implement color, panels, text, gutters, and other discrete features, rendering them the perfect genre for students’ exploration of multimodal texts (see Ajayi, 2009; Groensteen, 2007; Jacobs, 2013; McCloud, 2006; Misemer, 2015).⁹ In deeming the first assignment a comic strip, I hoped to provide students with a curricular task that they might find both “diverting” as an initial step to incorporating visual and written elements into a text and personally relevant as they drew upon their backgrounds in conveying an argument. Notably, by creating a comic, students can address future multimodal composition concerns, including how to interact with complicated multimodal texts for varied rhetorical purposes (see Chu & Coffey, 2015; Jacobs, 2007b; Misemer, 2015; Serafini, 2014).

As my third directive in selecting a comic strip as the introductory unit, I desired to foreground storytelling as a purpose in composing creative, visual, and written texts in a class containing some fiction and nonfiction writers, and Native American students for whom crafting tales featured largely. Within this discussion, it remains important not to stereotype Indigenous worldviews, as Anglo visions of Native Americans often delineate the latter (Aftandilian, 2011; Harkin & Lewis, 2007; Porter, 2012). Still, Western science foregrounds observation and experimentation, while Native outlooks value observation and lived experience (Bahr, 2015; Hain-Jamall, 2013), with many tribal groups relying on language, visuals, and stories to depict community members’ concerns (Brown & Begoray, 2017). According to a Choctaw elder, who shared histories, tales, and myths¹⁰ with my prior classes, area tribal stories feature both real and mythical beings and elements, and they provide one with lessons, including how to build domestic structures, grow crops, live within nature, and practice warfare, or warn of the forces one may encounter, such as natural disasters. Additionally, stories explain one’s birth, depict how to interact with mentors, and provide conduct codes and approaches to finding one’s fate.¹¹

⁹ Comics represent multimodal texts that render their argument through linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial aspects, producing effects that neither print or visual texts can create alone (Jacobs, 2013). According to Stephen Hoover, it is necessary now for students to engage with multimodal texts, such as graphic novels, since today’s consumers of information rely on fewer alphabetic-text sources than in the past (2012).

¹⁰ If the orally conveyed information that the Choctaw elder provided has been documented elsewhere, I have been unable to locate it.

¹¹ Focusing on Native peoples’ skills and paths, as the elder remarked, remains vital in a mainstream culture where tribal peoples are presented negatively or not featured at all. One traditional Choctaw ceremony affirming one’s strengths involves the “naming” of a pre-adolescent child based upon some quality. This ceremony, practiced informally now, assists children in accounting for their noteworthy traits. Comparably, tribal storytellers and creative writers denote a person’s or character’s central trait before drawing a sketch. Thus, for the first assignment, I decided that students should employ a comic’s word and image combinations (see Kharbach, 2018; Misemer, 2015) to document proclivities and biographical events associated with their identity.

Even now, upon entering college, Native American students suffer from the diminishment of their traditions based upon historical actions involving genocide, as well as tribes' legal and social marginalization (Hartman & Gone, 2014). Indigenous peoples have been called the United States' most disenfranchised population (Smith, Stinson, Dawson, Goldstein, Huang, & Grant, 2006), and they meet with intergenerational trauma as a factor impacting their overall status, including their educational expectancies (Tuhivai-Smith, 2012). Of any race, Native Americans possess the smallest secondary and postsecondary graduation rates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), and as is true at my institution, tribal students face hardships in transitioning to a university setting (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2005) and in associating their beliefs with the institutional norms found in course pedagogy and campus philosophy (Hankes, 2002). Instead of blending in, often, tribal college students experience feelings of academic inadequacy, isolation, and ostracism (Guillory, 2009). Moreover, many require not only social but also academic assistance in tackling core subjects, including English and writing, and in becoming critically literate, critiquing paradigms, working for social change, and continuing with their self-development (Brown & Begoray, 2017).

Since the 1990s, more faculty have been integrating graphic novels and comics into university courses, including writing classes, than ever before (Comer, 2015; Hoover, 2012; Tabachnick, 2007).¹² Thus, the article's reviewed scholarship provides information for teachers assigning the reading and composing of comics to students, and additional studies exist concerning utilizing comics in other academic settings (Ajayi 2008; Ajayi, 2009; Carter, 2007; Chun, 2008; Comer, 2015; Frey & Fisher, 2007; Harris-Fain, 2009; Jacobs, 2013; Misemer, 2015; Tabachnick, 2009). Yet, these authors make no formal assessment of students' work in measuring their academic outcomes, and none offers a case study centered

Asking tribal students to introduce themselves by rendering their identity through a cartoon strip, including the requisite to select its frame sizes, language, flow, and characters' positions and props (see McCloud, 2006), I believed, would reinforce composing premises connected to the tribal "naming" ritual and the creative writers' construction of character outlines shaping protagonists' goals.

Another historically relevant phenomenon for affirming tribal members' attributes, the elder noted, was the young person's engagement of a journey initiating him/her from childhood into adulthood. Besides being concerned with a person's or character's qualities, both tribal storytellers and creative writers generate a tale's plot by sending their main figure upon a quest involving some obstacle to overcome. Likewise, in assigning a cartoon, I believed that some students would employ a familiar narrative device to them by devising an episode concerning their fate, with the student-as-character establishing an identity upon pursuing a chosen road. Over time, many Choctaw students had told stories about their ancestors' "Trail of Tears," removals in which an estimated 4,000 people died on a government-forced march leading from the Choctaws' ancestral homeland to Indian Territory, now the state of Oklahoma. By retelling such tales and inventing others, the Choctaw people strive to ensure that their origins and cultural conceptions, including how to abide in nature with balance and positivity, will not be lost.

¹² Incidentally, the graphic novel is also the only type of novel with a growing readership today (Chu & Coffey, 2015; Short & Reeves, 2009).

on students' identities and a comic-strip-narrative assignment design, especially in an upper-division, multimodal writing class. Indeed, past academic research about comics and graphic novels centers around "literary," "theoretical," or "pedagogical studies," with a limited focus on students' comic composition processes, excepting examples such as McCloud (2006) and Nick Sousanis (2015) (Bahl, 2015). Additionally, researchers have explored comics based upon superheroes, women, and Jewish trauma narratives (Baskind & Omer-Sherman, 2010; Gardner, 2012), but little information is available concerning Native Americans in comics, as well as tribal college students as a population reading and producing them. It is necessary that administrators and faculty locate the best curricular formats for aiding tribal students in their matriculation rates (Battiste, 2013; Guillory, 2009), as well as for instructors to offer designs matching students' cultural identities and learning-style preferences (Brown & Begoray, 2017), including ones related to multimodal reading and composition processes.

Thus, in this article, I discuss a Written and Visual Media course, and its comic strip assignment, as an unexplored curricular design. This study, located at a public university, involves 60 students, including many Native Americans. Accounting for scholars' dialogues about assisting students to explore their inner conceptions and express them via multimodal composition acts, I investigate how a comic strip unit might be conceived to meet advanced writers' needs. Specifically, I consider how the comic assignment impacted students' engagement with multimodal writing, as well as identity topics, and how the outcomes could be measured. This paper presents ways to promote students' investment in comic-strip evaluation and design, with students reflecting upon the genre. Overall, findings indicate that the unit assignment benefitted many students' critical thinking, research, collaborative, and multimodal reading and writing practices, along with building their identity conceptions.

Method

RESEARCH SITE AND COURSE CURRICULUM

From 2016 through 2018, I conducted a study at an Oklahoma university serving the state's lowest income county. The institution is rurally located, and the state has a Native American population of almost 9%. The town where the university resides represents the Choctaw Nation tribe's capital, but the college itself is outside of tribal nation jurisdiction. Many undergraduates have low-income backgrounds, 57% are first-generation students, and 30% are registered Native Americans, mostly Choctaws and Chickasaws¹³ (Deidentified University "Factbook," 2018). Academically, only a little over 11% of students graduate within five years, and 28% finish at all, even though, according to prospects at similar institutions, students should be graduating at a rate of over 39% (2018). Thus, at the study's university, like elsewhere, some students, including those with rural backgrounds and those who are

¹³ Tribal students come from the "Big Five," and the state is home to 31 tribes.

Native American, face persistence issues as marginalized groups. Indeed, students tell stories of relatives who congratulate them on being the first in their extended family to attend college, yet many students feel unprepared for the university's academic standards because the state ranks second lowest in education nationally, having the lowest paid teachers likewise. Additionally, regionally, high-speed, internet service remains mostly unavailable (for the area's "digital divide," see Hembrough, Madewell, & Dunn, 2018). Consequently, upon enrolling at the university, many students possess little experience with composing with computers, do not own computers in their households, and must drive to campus to utilize computer labs with restricted hours.

To fulfill degree requirements, English majors take "Written and Visual Media," a course where they engage with and compose multimodal texts. The first unit covers graphic novels and comics,¹⁴ and students generate a comic strip introducing themselves and their lives in this area to a general audience, including class members (see Appling et al., 2009) hoping to learn more about them and be entertained in the process. In imagining their comic, students choose whether they want their story to be serious or humorous; whether the plot took place in the past, present, or future; and whether the setting and focus include realistic or fantastical elements. Besides generating a cartoon strip, students write a reflective essay, an assignment critique discussing how they composed their cartoon, its strengths and weaknesses, and the effect on viewers they hoped to produce and why (see Misemer, 2015). (See Appendix 1 for questions that students addressed). Separately, students also complete a literary analysis paper about a graphic novel the class covers (see Clark, 2013).

To facilitate students' engagement with Pixton's comic-producing program, I created a class account and informed students that they could also opt to draw their comic by hand or use another digital program if they wished. Only one, citing her love for drawing, selected the former route, leveling the playfield for the others, who embraced Pixton. The comic strip assignment's learning objectives included students' display of creativity; critical thinking; multimodal prowess in rendering and integrating visual images with alphabetic text; and dexterity in drafting, collaborating, revising, and furnishing a completed narrative about one's self (see Bahl, 2015). Within the reflective essay, students discussed how they had explored and researched aspects of their identity and background as established in their comic and contemplated their work, including its appeal to potential audiences. Finally, because students would complete three out of four multimodal assignments, with the others being unrelated to comics, two opted not to compose the comic strip, submitting only the literary analysis segment instead.

¹⁴ By placing this unit first, I was able to prevent students from viewing the course's alphabetic texts as more important than the visual and auditory ones (see Misemer, 2015; Nichols, 2009).

To begin the unit, students read autobiographical graphic novels and comic book selections,¹⁵ including Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2007),¹⁶ Robert Kirkman's and Tony Moore's *The Walking Dead: Volume 1* (2013), and Matt Dembicki's *Trickster: Native American Tales, A Graphic Collection* (2010), as well as studying examples of Native American comic superheroes.¹⁷ Furthermore, students learned about comic books' history, comic superheroes (see Leibold, 2007), and the conventions for reading and authoring comics. The class also critiqued the Pixton program by analyzing student examples posted and exploring the program's pros and cons. Specifically, for Paula Ureta (2015), an instructor of English language learners, Pixton's strengths involve the program's potential to formulate "colorful, expressive, creative" comics with a "wide range of increasingly realistic characters, which can be easily modified" and possess a "wide emotional range" through "preset expressions." Users may implement standard templates or start from the beginning (Appling et al., 2009; Truth, 2018). Moreover, since Pixton is a digital, comic-generating program, "less artistically inclined students" can be motivated to produce work also (Truth, 2018).

After viewing examples of comics and investigating comic design techniques, students began the comic strip and reflective essay. To foster critical thinking skills and express a storyline, they brainstormed for topics connected to their personal identity, including the nature of their hometown, family and friends, college disciplinary focus, jobs, and hobbies, while noting the stereotypes associated with these phenomena and researching their heritage's roots and the area's history. Notably, for their comic, many students were concerned with the rationales and subject matter that the Choctaw elder had outlined as being central to area storytelling principles. After the students decided upon a storyline, they storyboarded their narrative utilizing Pixton's storyboarding application and considered their comic's tone, whether funny or serious. Then, students created their cartoon with digitally constructed characters, settings, props, and any outside photos or images they wished to insert. To match their cartoon's visual images, the students wrote captions and dialogue, with a minimum of ten panels. Lastly, implementing digital rhetoric and multimodal writing theory, students composed a reflective essay examining their work's design, focus, and significance. At the semester's end, I built a class website to showcase students' comics and reflective essays, amongst their other multimodal projects, for public view (see Brown & Begoray, 2017), and some students also submitted their work to the student literary journal.

¹⁵ According to the New London Group, in contexts involving reading and composing, students should both critique existing textual meanings and patterns and also design their own in documents (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

¹⁶ See Marla Harris for a discussion of utilizing *Persepolis* to explore multicultural contexts in the classroom (2007).

¹⁷ Comics represent a good option for multimodal narrative studies (Chu & Coffey, 2015).

RESEARCH METHODS

Having Institutional Review Board approval, I designed the study as an exploratory case study, which offers an “opportunity to learn” (Stake, 1995, p. 6).¹⁸ Concerning the study’s aims and based upon the existing literature, I explored how fashioning a comic strip positioning one’s identity would impact students’ ability to implement multimodal composition practices, as well as portray aspects of themselves. Likewise, I considered how the comic assignment might be assessed to measure writing outcomes. A case study involves collecting data from multiple sources to formulate a case description and themes (Cresswell, 2012), and I utilized diverse data forms to produce results (see Yin, 2009), including a post-assignment survey with Likert-style and open-ended questions, student assignments, and classroom observations. Via the surveys, students revealed their engagement with collaborative acts, critical thinking, research, and multimodal reading and writing practices. Furthermore, I evaluated students’ comic strip for themes related to their identity’s portrayal and their reflective essay for themes connected to their comic assignment’s outcomes, as well as students’ discussion of their backgrounds and personal, educational, and career goals. Finally, during the unit, I took field notes to capture my classroom observations.

To provide for flexibility and adaptation, I applied a grounded theory methodology to collect data and formulate themes in the data linked to the study’s research questions (Strauss, 1987),¹⁹ and I also created a rubric to measure students’ academic outcomes for the comic strip. Utilizing current literature on the study’s subject and the study’s themes, I selected an analytical framework to connect the data and build a storyline (Yin, 2009) about the study’s setting, participants, and chronology to describe the case’s details (Cresswell, 2012). Additionally, I orchestrated a rubric to calculate multimodal writing outcomes for the comic strip. I selected the comic unit assignment for assessment because in producing it, students discussed their identity, and the unit also represented a measure of their interaction with multimodal discourses. Acting as raters, another writing researcher and I compared students’ work. On a five-point scale, we rated each cartoon strip’s organization; development and

¹⁸ Via a case study, one can evaluate a programmatic design holistically and fully to generate a comprehension of it and its relation to participants, and to describe the case (Baxter & Jack, 2008). In this study, I desired to investigate students’ positioning of their identity through their construction of a comic strip and coinciding reflection on it (see Baskarada, 2014).

¹⁹ To investigate common strands in the study, I applied a thematic analysis to the data by following these steps: reading and annotating the documents, identifying themes, formulating a coding scheme, which entailed determining the themes and codes to be utilized; and coding the data (Bricki & Green, 2007). As part of this process, another writing researcher assisted me in generating codes connected to the study’s research questions to define preliminary themes and findings, and we coded datasets involving students’ comic strip and reflective essay to create internal consistency. In all areas, correlation coefficients used to assess inter-rater reliability within the dataset ranged from good to adequate in all areas.

clarification of ideas; diction, style, and voice; audience and genre features; artwork; and synthesis of information and cohesion.²⁰

SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS

In the study, the 60 participants completing comic strips and reflective essays ranged in age from 19 to 48, with the majority being in their early twenties. Furthermore, males represented 38% ($n = 23$) and females 62% ($n = 37$) of participants. Caucasian students were the majority, with Native Americans, mostly Choctaw and Chickasaw, ranking second. Additionally, more than half of students ($n = 30$) had a combined household income of below \$30,000, thus living at the poverty level, and most came from rural backgrounds. Refer to Appendix 2, Table 1, for group demographics.

Findings and Discussion

INTERACTING WITH CARTOON STRIPS AND THE SHARING OF ONE'S IDENTITY

In composing a comic strip and reflective essay, students engaged with multimodal composition and reading practices by considering, researching, and writing about identity-related issues, as well as critiquing one another's comics and reflective essays. At the unit's outset, according to classroom discussions, many students, asked to create comics about themselves, could generate few ideas. Likewise, the requisite to utilize the Pixton program or draw a cartoon themselves for the assignment posed issues for some, who did not believe they had any aptitude for computer-generated art programs or hand-drawn figures. Yet, once students began to explore their identities and decided upon a storyline, they were eager to produce comics, distilling an idea into a limited number of frames while offering an entertaining premise (see Abel & Madden, 2008; Appling et al., 2009; McCloud, 2006). For their digitally rendered cartoon, some students also inserted pictures of themselves and their families, pets, and houses in order to make their work more individualistic. Furthermore, the process of peer reviewing the comic strip's rough draft, as well as receiving input from me, assisted students in collaborating and producing a final version. Finally, students brainstormed ideas for their comics and showed one another how to perform techniques related to the Pixton program together, prompting more unity of intention in their group interactions than usual (see Appling et al., 2009). After the unit's end, four students retained their Pixton memberships by assuming the cost themselves, with one describing how he and his children had employed the program to fashion other comics. The unit also led one Choctaw student, Tara, who liked Manga cartoons, to decide she wanted to draw and produce comics

²⁰ Inter-rater reliability coefficients indicated that we raters correlated perceptions of students' achievement in the cartoon strip's "development and clarification of ideas," and "organization" most closely. Correlation coefficients used to assess inter-rater reliability within this dataset ranged from good to adequate in all areas.

professionally. (See Appendix 3.1 for Tara's comic). Similarly, in their reflective essays, many Teacher Education majors described how they planned to assign future students to read graphic novels, as well as create comics via a digital, comic-generating program²¹ in their own classrooms.²²

In the reflective essay, students identified having achieved specific academic outcomes upon engaging with the comic strip assignment. Overall, many reported that the unit facilitated advancements in their critical thinking, researching, collaborative, and multimodal reading and writing practices, all target course goals. Furthermore, most students relayed that their knowledge of and interest in comics had increased. As the largest academic outcome categories, over 90% of students ($n = 55$) reported that the unit supported both their multimodal reading and writing skills' growth. Likewise, more than three-fourths ($n = 47$) noted that completing the comic strip improved their understanding of reading and writing comics, and other multimodal texts more generally, and heightened their critical thinking, research, and collaborative skill levels. Proceeding, almost two thirds of students ($n = 39$) believed that the unit promoted their educational and personal interests, and almost a third ($n = 19$) agreed that they might fashion future comic strips on their own. Specifically, many Native American students explained that it had been a valuable act for them to describe and render themselves, as well as the people and places relevant to them, through a cartoon strip. Notably, this ultimate finding is significant in affirming the Choctaw elder's position on the importance of storytelling performances for area tribal members in constructing their identity. In the reflective essay, one Choctaw woman wrote, "In my family, we write down our stories and save clippings and pictures in boxes. A cartoon is like a story with a picture, but you can remember it how you want. This way, history does not write us or erase us." On a related, those students who discussed formulating their comic strip in a more positive manner in the reflective essay also performed better on the unit assignment overall. See Appendix 2, Table 2, for students' self-reported unit assignment outcomes as drawn from the reflective essays.

²¹ Since many women students represented pre-service teachers, and 60% of graphic novel readers, nationally, are women (Masters, 2006), this assignment proved valuable and interesting for the former, too.

²² Indeed, one pre-service teacher, who foresaw her reliance on comics in her own classroom and the important links one could make to identity, gave an account about having taught a comic-strip creating session at the local Boys and Girls Club, where a 10-year-old boy, who enjoyed the experience, exclaimed, "I like Batman, and I like cars. I didn't have to write about Columbus and Indians, Puritans and Indians, or cowboys and Indians in my comic." Note: I realize that using the term "Indian" to indicate a Native American may be seen as pejorative in some contexts, yet in my area, this term is often used by Native Americans across all generations, and I wanted to preserve the club member's voice in this quotation.

FACING THE CONFLICTS

Jeff Appling, a teacher implementing the Pixton program at his university, had worried about the experiential circumstance that neither he nor his students had constructed a comic strip before the class's start (Appling et al., 2009). Similarly, as the semester began, I also wondered if the assignment would serve as a good idea, since only two of my students had created comics previously, but outside of Pixton, while the rest of us were beginners. Indeed, as elements impacting students' unit involvement overall, their past reading and writing experiences and familiarity with comics influenced their perception of the assignment (see Jacobs, 2007b). Some students, who indicated, at the outset, that they "did not know how" to formulate a cartoon starring themselves had also reported possessing limited experience with reading comics. Others admitted to feeling "nervous" about addressing the project's visual aspect. Yet, because the comic assignment's focus in depicting one's identity remained open, students found that they could portray different relevant concerns in their digital texts.

As the unit progressed, students discussed the comics we were reading in an increasingly complex manner.²³ Nonetheless, not everyone liked interacting with comics, as it became apparent during the first week of one class's section. As I reviewed the syllabus, an older student interrupted me to read the *Oxford Dictionary's* definition of "literature" and argue that comics did not fit within it.²⁴ Calling the graphic novels and comics we would be covering "low work," this student opted subsequently to write the literary analysis paper related to the class's graphic novels only but not to create his own comic. (Because students completed three of four multimodal class assignments offered, he faced no grade penalty.) Indeed, as it became clear to me, stereotypes about comics still exist as to their being unsuited for advanced readers desiring to investigate complicated topics (Hoover, 2012; Richardson, 2017), while other readers prefer "traditional" print novels to graphic novels, since they enjoy formulating the plot in their mind while relying on the author's language for the backdrop (see Frey & Fisher, 2013). Yet, having an established literary merit and cultural significance, graphic novels as a genre can play a lifelong role in students' reading practices (Crawford, 2004), providing concepts and patterns that readers might not encounter otherwise and promoting transitions to more print-oriented texts (Gallo & Weiner, 2004; Gravett, 2005; Schwarz, 2002a). Likewise, when teachers bar comics from the classroom, or readers overlook their worth, they send the message that they do not value those "who think, read, and decode differently from the narrowest notion of reading and literacy" (Cater, 2008).

²³ In one study, a professor of Developmental English courses asked students to select which version of a particular text they wished to read for the class, the graphic novel or the traditional format. Most students chose to read the graphic novel but then later decided to read the traditional version, too, in order to compose a compare and contrast essay of them (Schmidt, 2011). Thus, once students are introduced to one format of a text, they may be willing to view it in another.

²⁴ Later, he went to the department chair with his "complaint," which the latter did not support. Still, by the next unit, this student had chosen to write a detective story and selected online graphics to illustrate it, surpassing the assignment's original expectations with his focus on multimodality.

According to the Pixton website, program users can craft entire comic books by implementing approaches, such as blurring, transparency, silhouetting, and custom speech bubbles, and applying more than 4,000 backgrounds, 3,000 props, and 700 topic-specific settings (2018). For Truth and colleagues, Pixton offers a “wide variety of characters, both male and female, in various roles that do not adhere to stigmatizing stereotypes,” with the program being “more equitable than other comic creator sites” (Truth, 2018). Still, during my class and within the reflective essay, some students discussed their dilemma concerning how they might best portray their jobs, hobbies, and home, as well as their racial and sexual identity, and body type. As a drawback of Pixton’s program, Appling identifies that “although the props are increasing in number and variety, they still are lacking” (Appling et al., 2009).

In one class, a Choctaw student, rolling her eyes, searched for props, including feather headdresses, canoes, and hatchets, as well as settings featuring buffaloes and teepees. Indeed, for some time, the student attempted to locate items and backdrops holding “the right meaning” for her, as she deemed it, with her scenario being reminiscent for me of the Choctaw elder’s description of the “naming” ceremony’s significance, with its need for accuracy in ascribing values to individuals with which they would frame themselves. In the classroom, the woman and other tribal students discussed how the subject matter and backgrounds they found for their cartoon strips did not reflect their lives and times.²⁵ “So, I looked for settings like bars, trailer parks, and casinos²⁶ instead,” one male Choctaw student, sitting at his computer, joked.²⁷ Indeed, another Choctaw student, who worked as a blackjack dealer, did focus her cartoon on her full-time job at the local casino, where, as she relayed in her reflective essay, the patrons depicted turned into actual zombies “out to win it big.” (See Appendix 3.2). Likewise, a second student working as a server at this casino described the stressors involved as being daunting in kind. (See Appendix 3.3).

Some students who were of a mixed race, tattooed and inked, and/or women also ran aground with defining themselves via Pixton’s program. Bryant, who was Choctaw and African-American, argued in his reflective essay that in his comic strip, he had wanted to avoid foregrounding “typical” symbols related to both ethnicities altogether, since, as he stated, the “near past does not look so great for me.” Instead, Bryant chose to focus on his hobbies,

²⁵ The Native American students discussed their experiences with tribal stereotypes in some depth. One male Choctaw student said, “When I go on vacation, people tell me how they have a Cherokee great-grandmother and say that I am their blood brother. They smile, and I don’t.” Another continued, “People ask me if I have been solicited to act in Westerns. But you wouldn’t ask a Jewish person if they were solicited for a Holocaust movie.”

²⁶ The Choctaw Nation owns 7 casinos, 14 smoke shops, 13 truck stops, and 2 fast-food restaurants, and it has helped increase the county’s per capita income to \$24,000 (Choctaw Nation, 2018). Nonetheless, some area Native Americans have a quality of life similar to people living in developing nations (see Anderson, 1995).

²⁷ Indeed, one criticism of some comics portraying Native Americans is the latter’s association with poverty, unemployment, welfare dependence, crime, violence, and substance abuse (Aurylaite, 2015; Royal, 2010).

including sports, traveling, and reading,²⁸ to depict himself in a positive, self-possessed light. (See Appendix 3.4). Similarly, another Choctaw student described how Pixton did not feature tattoos for application on a character's body, and neither did any of the skin colors and hairstyles seem right for her. Furthermore, as an older Caucasian student expressed to her dissatisfaction, none of the female characters was "curvy or big without being grotesque" in body type to act as her equivalent.

In continuing with a discussion on representation issues, in the reflective essay, a Choctaw veteran expressed how he had desired to investigate his veteran identity in his comic strip but did not care to feature a gun as indicating his infantryman past and also felt "ambivalent" about including the American flag and national edifices, such as the White House, too. Finally, this student decided to portray his relationship with one of his eight children instead.²⁹ Comparably, another veteran did opt to utilize a poster of Uncle Sam's call for military recruits to display her past Army career, yet she gave this aspect of her identity only a single frame in order to concentrate on other aspects of herself, including her family and career. Notably, at the study's university, student service-members/veterans play a significant minority group, even though nationally, Native Americans are a valuable military portion that is often overlooked, while the majority of current military service-members hail from lesser known rural locations (U.S. Department of Defense, 2018).³⁰ With tribal student-veterans' identities being an almost unknown factor for many outsiders, I believed it had proven worthwhile for those in my class to position themselves positively via their comic.

Overall, concerning students' interaction with the comic unit, in composing the reflective essay, only four reported their dislike of it, with two calling their engagement with comics "irrelevant" and "off topic," and two dubbing the comic strip assignment "difficult" or too "time-consuming."³¹ Similarly, responding to the post-survey that Barbara Weaver gave to her own college students for their comic assignment, only two believed that the program had been "too difficult to learn and took too much time" to implement (Appling et al., 2009).

²⁸ Similarly, in Brown & Begoray's study, in creating their graphic novels, students addressed stereotypes of Indigenous teens as being "drunk" or "violent" (see also Friedel, 2010).

²⁹ While the student seated next to him was crafting a superhero's identity, in his own reflective essay, the veteran mentioned that he himself, having served for 11 years, believed the "only true heroes were the dead ones," and he "did not want any dead bodies" in his cartoon.

³⁰ Although the nation's smallest pan-ethnic segment, signifying 1% of the population, Native Americans possess the highest per capita military participation rate of any racial group (2018), with one in three active in some capacity (U.S. Census, 2010).

³¹ As a side note, Pixton does not have a spelling or grammar check, either, which made the peer review process arduous in that aspect.

EXPLORING IDENTITY-RELATED THEMES IN THE COMIC STRIP

Frequent topics for comics include politics and history, as well as family matters, romantic relationships, and instances of abuse (Goreman, 2002), and in the unit's reflective essay, many students discussed the generation of their comic's aspects in a manner underscoring the Choctaw elder's listing of tribal stories' subject matter, which emphasized one's birth³² and character, one's embarkment on a quest-like journey to enter adulthood, one's discovery of how to thrive as a result of one's toil, one's interaction with family, and one's attempts to commune with nature. As mentioned, students' backgrounds, hobbies, majors, and knowledge of and interest in comics and graphic novels impacted the identity traits and paths they portrayed in their cartoon. For example, students revealed important life events, from personally traumatic experiences, including cancer diagnoses, depressive episodes, divorces, family members' jail stints and deaths, and the drug culture's impact, to natural disasters, including fires, tornadoes, and hurricanes. Likewise, hoping their college educations would prove valuable, many, including those living below the poverty line, detailed low-income jobs, busy family and social lives, and dream careers ($n = 17$), as well as the necessity of relying upon family members and friends to assist them in achieving their goals ($n = 7$). In fact, with more than half of students overall representing first-generation college attendees, 50% decided to dedicate their comics to the steps they were taking to gain a degree ($n = 30$), while others foregrounded their multiple roles as students, parents, and workers, the combination of which made them feel perpetually "tired"³³ ($n = 8$). As a related focus, with their comics, some students also identified generational and tribal connections to the rural lands, small towns, and homes they occupied ($n = 22$), with four describing a local myth, one depicting a forest walking path, and 22 portraying farms or ranches. Concentrating on place represented a major theme for students, with more than half of those surveyed originating from villages of fewer than 5,000 people ($n = 31$).

Adopting varied tones for the comic, students delineated funny, ironic, and controversial life issues as impacted by their surrounding society, including instances of racism, sexism, and classism, especially in the workplace. Additionally, more students created realistic, rather than fantastical, comic strips (80% versus 20%), with few representing themselves as superhero-like ($n = 7$), either in "actuality" or in some everyday aspect,³⁴ even though we had studied some examples of superheroes in the course. Indeed, continuing with the class sections' sarcastic and self-reflexive stance toward completing the comic assignment, one student joked to the others that his only superpower was his ability to "withstand" the draw

³² Native American infants suffer from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome at twice the rate of Caucasian babies (Office of Minority Health, 2013).

³³ Notably, tribal peoples report themselves as being under "frequent mental stress" 20% more often than other groups (Kalt, Henson, Taylor, Curtis, Cornell, . . . & Nelson, 2008).

³⁴ Comic book superheroes, with their American aura of self-confidence, gained popularity at the Great Depression's end and World War II's beginning (Karp, 2011; Romagnoli & Pagnucci, 2013).

of meth, a drug, proving kryptonite-like, that destroyed his family.³⁵ Likewise, of the two plotline types calculated, more students' journeys represented comedies than tragedies (79% versus 21%), indicating their arguable willingness to remain positive about their identities and circumstances, if presenting their situations with irony or black humor. Overall, as a central theme, students showed themselves as being supportive of their families and communities (see Brown & Begoray, 2017), even if they themselves felt undervalued, and many of their comics featured the subjects of educating others, including as future teachers³⁶ ($n = 8$) and the parents of small children ($n = 11$). For instance, Olivia, with her cartoon, shows her struggles with justifying her decision to be a high-school teacher to her family. (See Appendix 3.5). In her reflective essay, Olivia explains her comic's purpose, which, she writes, "is meant to show a more satirical side to the constant questioning I receive for wanting to become a teacher. My strip follows my character, Olivia, as she listens to the more common reactions people give her when she explains her major. The strip ends on a positive note, as Olivia decides to ignore her critics and follow her dreams to become a teacher anyway." Overall, Olivia's comic represents an example of how some students delineated their identities as a confirmation of whom they were and how they wished others to perceive them.

Finally, five students utilized their comic as a self-reflexive glance at composing within the genre itself, as well as addressing the assignment's multimodality. For example, Noah, through her comic, explored the milestones in her life and then undercut them by explaining that she was implementing the comic strip medium as a means to provide this information to audience members, even if this genre was not her "preferred" one. In the last frame, the author-as-character sits in a chair on stage, as if being interviewed on a television talk show, and admits, "Now, I'm here telling you about my life in a stupid cartoon strip." (See Appendix 3.6). In her reflective essay, Noah relays, "In this comic, I wanted to tell you my backstory in a straightforward but humorous way. It accurately describes my journey through life thus far, and showcases some highlights. Obviously, the artwork is mediocre at best, but that's why I'm an English major and not a Graphic Design major. Overall, I feel that this derpy little comic does a good job of reflecting who I am."

While the majority of students, as English majors, reported their preference for reading and writing alphabetic texts, almost all were willing, especially the creative writers and many tribal students, to attempt a digital comic strip for the course. See Appendix 2, Table 3, for

³⁵ Native Americans possess the highest rates of illegal drug abuse of any demographic group, and methamphetamine abuse is a major concern (National Drug Intelligence Center, 2008). As a point of interest, in the study's county, a reported 25% of babies born at the hospital contain methamphetamines in their system.

³⁶ According to the Choctaw elder, elders were to be respected, with their function being to impart knowledge. Guides, teachers, mentors, and religious leaders were also important similarly and relied upon for spiritual, day-to-day, and medical information.

the themes that raters generated concerning students' rendering of character traits, plotlines, genre aspects, secondary characters, and settings in their comic strip.

MEASURING WRITING OUTCOMES FOR THE COMIC STRIP

As described in the methodology, the other rater and I assessed students' outcomes for the comic strip, including ones involving multimodality. We ascertained that students performed highest in the areas of 1) "synthesis of information and cohesion," with 90% of cartoon strips fulfilling the objective, and 2) "audience and genre requirements," with 80% satisfying the criteria. Findings suggest that the assignment's multimodal focus also aided most students in addressing the comic's other components, with 75% meeting outcomes for "development and clarity," as well as for "diction, style, and voice." Overall, students were able to meet all of the comic strip's requisites at least 60% of the time, with the category of "artwork" being ranked lowest. A focus on multimodal composition assists students in completing an array of assignments (Appling et al., 2009; Misemer, 2015), including comics, and this study indicates that when students interact with comics involving personal identity conceptions, they can produce satisfactory work for various, multimodal-related composition aspects. See Appendix 2, Table 4 for raters' assessment of students' outcomes upon completing the comic strip assignment.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

To navigate within various "systems of meaning making" (Jacobs, 2007b), students must learn to read and compose work in multiple textual modes. Yet, writing teachers selecting comics for their curricula can present students with the opportunity to gain the critical-literacy skills they require, as well as addressing a need for critical thinking, research, collaborative, and multimodal reading and writing processes. Likewise, due to the types and natures of area Native Americans' mythologies, histories, traumas, cultural practices, and communication styles and preferences, including the emphasis on oral and visual communication patterns, some associated tribal writers might find that comics function well as a forum for their stories, too (see Royal, 2010). Indeed, a few nationally known, Native American authors have adopted the comic's genre to their benefit (Sheyahshe, 2008).

In the writing classroom itself, incorporating comic assignments into one's course design can be difficult, especially when faculty do not possess digital-technology backgrounds (see Selfe, 2004), as well as models demonstrating how computer-based assignments can be integrated (see Sealey-Morris, 2015). Nonetheless, by utilizing comics as focal texts for reading and writing assignments, teachers and students can not only address multimodal composition literacy requisites, but also investigate personal and larger, identity-related conflicts, with students opting to compose comics as a creative replacement for some traditional writing assignments (see Comer, 2015). Significantly, autobiographical comics allow students to

convey their stories through the use of metaphor and the inclusion of topics that are difficult to present or that might not hold readers' attention in another medium (see Eisner, 1996). Just as importantly, through a comic's narrative structure, students may make sense of their story's fragments (see Postema, 2013), mixing every day and extraordinary happenings (see Chute, 2010a) and portraying the relationship between their past and present life episodes (see Gardner, 2006), which, when interwoven, may define one's identity in a manner with which audiences, including one's peers, empathize (see Chaney, 2016).

Regardless of the struggle on some students' part, the production of a comic strip and reflective essay led most to improve their critical thinking, research, collaborative, and multimodal reading and writing processes, as well as considering facets of their identity related to their personality, major, family, job, and hometown. When the unit began, almost all students possessed only a limited experience with graphic novels and comics. Still, most were able to grasp and implement identity-related discourses within a rather difficult multimodal assignment all on its own, as only two students possessed prior experience with generating comic strips. Thus, this article provides writing teachers and administrators with information about the benefits and obstacles involved in employing a comic strip and reflective essay within a multimodal composition course's curriculum, especially in addressing critical multiliteracies (see Schwarz, 2002b; Yildirim, 2013). Additionally, the study offers new knowledge concerning the region's rural and Native American students' assessed outcomes upon their interaction with comics at a Southwestern university. For Native American students, particularly, the ability to assume new values and attempt innovative practices while relying upon their traditional Native identity can contribute to their academic and personal successes (see Demmert, 2001). In the study, tribal students orchestrated comics as digital, multimodal texts showcasing their academic and career goals; racial backgrounds; and personal, family, and communal concerns. Moreover, by posting their work on a website to reach a larger public in order to change and shape the ways in which tribal peoples are depicted, students demonstrated a sense of civic and group engagement (see Brown & Begoray, 2017). Altogether, the study's findings support researchers' claims about the value of asking students to read and produce comics as having significant effects upon their critical thinking, research, collaborative, and multimodal reading and writing outcomes, as well as their comprehension of valued identity dimensions.

STUDY LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study possesses two notable limitations for scholars pursuing future directions. As one limitation, I did not survey students utilizing an acculturation scale in order to determine how influential of a factor their Native American heritage plays in their overall identity formation, according to larger cultural constructs. However, implementing the American Indian Enculturation Scale (Winderowd, Montgomery, Stumblingbear, Harless, & Hicks, 2008) or the Native American Acculturation Scale (Garrett & Pichette, 2000) might provide an

additional method of gathering information about students' values and backgrounds compared with their own and other tribal groups. On a separate note, as most students in the class decided to produce realistic, autobiographical narratives of themselves, in future courses, I may exclude superhero-based texts in order to determine whether this adjustment alters course outcomes concerning how students depict themselves (see Misemer, 2015). Moreover, future studies could include other racial, minority student groups and provide more geographical diversity, as well investigating the impact of reading and writing comics for Native American college students directly from or living on reservations.³⁷

Conclusion

In my classes, many Native American students, upon introducing themselves to classmates, list their lineage by naming their parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and others tracing back. Students delineate when their ancestors arrived in Oklahoma and whether or not they signed the Dawes Act (circa 1887 to 1906) to become designated tribal members; what percentage of tribal membership they, the students, possess; and what famed, area figures constitute students' family relations. Indeed, students know stories about their ancestors' trials in walking the "Trail of Tears," yet the former also require the means to explore their own journeys, an avenue with which the comic assignment provided them. Notably, by formulating comics and utilizing digital storytelling practices, students believed that they could resist and shift the stereotypes attached to them. In their comics, many Native American students implemented humor mixed with social commentary in recognizing their need to depict a shared tragic history while denoting the importance of remaining resilient during their own current hardships. As one student, enrolled simultaneously in a humanities course, ventured, "Those ancient Greeks marrying their mothers and murdering their fathers, with thunderbolts crashing from the mountain in warning, the snaky women, and a giant one-eye, they ain't got nothing on us with our stories, real stories, about war, death, and how to live with self-determination. . . . I don't go [to museums around here] to learn about myself, . . . my life is not some myth."³⁸

According to the Choctaw elder, tribal stories exist on realistic and proverbial levels. Still, the tales told had to be entertaining for audiences to listen to and repeat them, and it remained vital to select uplifting stories about one's self when one's surrounding culture and even language structures were disrupted at the most elemental levels. For the elder, the Choctaws must continue to spin their yarns not only to indicate their universal concerns but also to

³⁷ For instance, students might critique comics, such as Jason Aaron's *Scalped* (2007), portraying reservation life.

³⁸ According to Samuel Cook (1994), "In the context of Indian affairs, self-determination is a tribally-derived term. By the same token, the concept of self-determination entails a totality of tribal goals. These goals can be placed in three interrelated categories: 1) tribal self-rule; 2) cultural survival; and 3) economic development."

counteract typecasts, including ones portraying them as silent and violent-natured in their communication patterns. Today, the number of Native Americans enrolled in higher education has grown to 0.7% of all students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Meanwhile, since the Vietnam draft, the number of active duty military service-members has lessened to an all-volunteer force consisting of less than 1% of adult citizens (Bialik, 2017). Discussing other groups associated with the 1%, with the Occupy Movement ignited in 2011, a majority fingered a 1% representing Wall Street's interests. Given this dynamic, the question remains in play: Whose narratives are being expressed, and whose are being heard? Depicted by the 1850's government as being associated with "the Indian Problem," present-day Choctaw Nation members "pride" themselves "on preserving and celebrating" their "unique traditions" and "not only want to pass these traditions to" their "youth," but also "share them with all people" (Choctaw Nation, 2018), a telling and visualizing act made possible in the present scenario by student members' production of comic strips evoking their identity.

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Appendix 1: Major Questions Students Addressed in the Reflective Essay

1. Discuss how you composed your cartoon, with its strengths and weaknesses, and the effect on viewers you hoped to produce and why.
2. Did the Comic Strip assignment strengthen your critical thinking and research skills? If so, how?
3. Did the Comic Strip assignment strengthen your multimodal reading skills? If so, how?
4. Did the Comic Strip assignment strengthen your multimodal writing skills? If so, how?
5. Did the Comic Strip assignment prove useful in your learning more about comics as a multimodal genre? If so, how?
6. Did the Comic Strip assignment strengthen your collaborative practices? If so, how?
7. Did the Comic Strip assignment promote your educational and personal interests? If so, how?
8. Did the Comic Strip assignment prompt you to consider continuing to make comics in future? If so, why?
9. Describe your Comic Strip's main character and his/her main motivation or goal.
10. Describe your Comic Strip's setting.
11. Describe your Comic Strip's secondary characters.

Appendix 2: Selected Tables

TABLE 1. STUDENTS' DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

N = 60 students

Race	Caucasian 51% (31)	Native American 40% (24)	Hispanic/ Latino 4% (2)	African- American 3% (2)	Asian/Pacific Islander 2% (1)
Age	18-21 60% (36)	22-25 43% (>26)	26-29 1% (>1)	35-39 1% (>1)	45-49 3% (>2)
Annual Household Income	\$0-15,000 24% (14)	\$16,000- 30,000 27% (16)	\$31,000- 45,000 12% (7)	\$46,000- 60,000 15% (9)	> \$60,000 22% (13)
Permanent Residence	Oklahoma 79% (47)	Texas 21% (13)	NA		
Town Size	Under 5,000 52% (31)	5,000- 10,000 22% (13)	11,000- 20,000 13% (8)	30,000- 50,000 11% (7)	60,000 + 2% (1)

**TABLE 2. STUDENTS' SELF-REPORTED OUTCOMES IN THE REFLECTIVE ESSAY UPON
COMPLETING THE COMIC STRIP**

N = 60 students

Academic Outcomes for Comic Strip and Reflective Essay Assignments	
Strengthened critical thinking and research skills	85% (51)
Strengthened multimodal reading skills	92% (55)
Strengthened multimodal writing skills	95% (57)
Proved useful in learning more about comics as a multimodal genre	78% (47)
Strengthened collaborative practices	75% (45)
Promoted educational and personal interests	65% (39)
Prompted student to consider continuing to make comics in future	32 % (19)

TABLE 3. THEMES FOR CHARACTER TRAITS, PLOT LINES, GENRE ASPECTS, INCLUSION OF OTHER CHARACTERS AND SETTING THAT STUDENTS GENERATED IN THE COMIC STRIP

Main Character's Traits
Character has a secret power/skill (1) or special prop, like a crown (2).
Character has a known flaw/weakness (2).
Character represents a superhero (3); an everyday hero at home (3) or work (1); or an immigrant (1).
Cartoon Strip Plotline Type
Comic relies upon causal events, with a beginning and ending, and the story is a comedy (15); tragedy (4); or mystery (1).
Comic is a slice-of-life description of the character and shows a series of standalone moments or events (37).
Story is about a traumatic event, including a death in the family (1), a divorce (1), cancer (1), or an injury (1); a mental condition, such as depression (1) or being tired (8); an existential fugue state (2); the area's drug culture's negative effects (2); or a natural disaster, including a fire (1), a tornado (1), or a hurricane (1).
Genre Aspects
Comic involves a lesson (3) or town myth (4) the character learns.
Story is realistic (48).
Story has supernatural, dream, or fairytale-like aspects (12).
Story includes a self-reflexive look at composing the comic strip (4) or anime themes (1).
Secondary Characters
Story is about/mentions the author's child/ren (11).
Story is about/mentions the author's spouse/significant other (9), siblings (5), or friends (15).
Story is about/mentions the author's pet(s) (3).
Story has a guide, including a parent, god figure, coach, etc. (7).
Settings
Story is about a job, past or current (6), including at gas stations (2), construction (1), casinos (3), offices (1), daycares (1), fast food (2), and in the Army (1).
Story is about/mentions the author's home (9), including a farm or ranch (13).
Story is about/mentions attending school (1), including home school (4), attending college (30), and making career plans (24), including teaching (8).
Story is about a hobby, including sports (8), racing (2), acting (1), singing (2), baking (1), drawing (1), reading (3), writing (3), traveling (4), or visiting theme parks (2).

TABLE 4. RATERS' ASSESSMENT OF STUDENTS' OUTCOMES UPON COMPLETING THE COMIC STRIP

N = 60 students

Writing Outcomes for the Cartoon Strip	Percentage of Assignments Associated with Each Outcome, with "1" Being the Lowest and "5" the Highest				
	Fails to Meet Requirements 1	Fair 2	Meets Requirements 3	Good 4	Excellent 5
Synthesis of Information and Cohesion	5% <i>n</i> = 3	5% <i>n</i> = 3	50% <i>n</i> = 30	20% <i>n</i> = 12	20% <i>n</i> = 12
Development and Clarity	5% <i>n</i> = 3	10% <i>n</i> = 6	25% <i>n</i> = 15	20% <i>n</i> = 12	30% <i>n</i> = 18
Diction, Style, and Voice	10% <i>n</i> = 6	15% <i>n</i> = 9	35% <i>n</i> = 21	25% <i>n</i> = 15	15% <i>n</i> = 9
Audience and Genre Requirements	5% <i>n</i> = 3	15% <i>n</i> = 9	35% <i>n</i> = 21	25% <i>n</i> = 15	20% <i>n</i> = 12
Artwork	5% <i>n</i> = 3	35% <i>n</i> = 21	40% <i>n</i> = 24	10% <i>n</i> = 6	10% <i>n</i> = 6

Appendix 3: Selected Images

APPENDIX 3.1: “A TALK WITH TARA”

Tara is Choctaw student majoring in English with a Writing Emphasis. Tara, who likes the anime genre and Manga cartoons, decided she wanted to draw and produce comics professionally after completing the comic unit. In one of her cartoon panels, Tara depicts herself at an anime convention.

Hi. I'm Tara, and in this comic strip, you will find out a little bit about me and what I like. Let's begin!

First is Anime. I absolutely love it.

Second is Manga (the book version of anime).

I also like to play Otome games. I only have two.

I loved going to Tokyo in Tulsa (anime convention).

I also enjoy drawing. This is some of my work.

Some websites that I am often on are...

Here are some shows that aren't anime that I really like.

I have six siblings, but this is me and my little sister.

These are just a few things that I enjoy.

IMAGE SOURCE(S):
 2: Slide1.JPG / Google Images
 3: Slide2.JPG / Google Images
 4: Slide7.JPG / Google Images
 5: Slide3.JPG / Mine
 6: Slide4.JPG / Mine
 7: Slide5.JPG / Google Images
 8: Slide6.JPG / Google Images
 9: Tara and Tori.jpg / Mine

APPENDIX 3.2: “DEALERS FOR DESSERT”

A Choctaw student, who works as a blackjack dealer, focuses her cartoon on her full-time job at the local casino, where the patrons depicted turned into actual zombies “out to win it big.” This student has worked full-time at night and carried a full course load. With her upcoming degree, she wants to start a publishing house for children's books.

Dealers for Dessert

by Naughtorious



APPENDIX 3.3: “MY TWO JOBS”

Another student working as a server at the same casino described the stressors involved as being daunting. Simultaneously, this student also acts as a waitress at a separate restaurant. Meanwhile, at the university, she is an honors student.



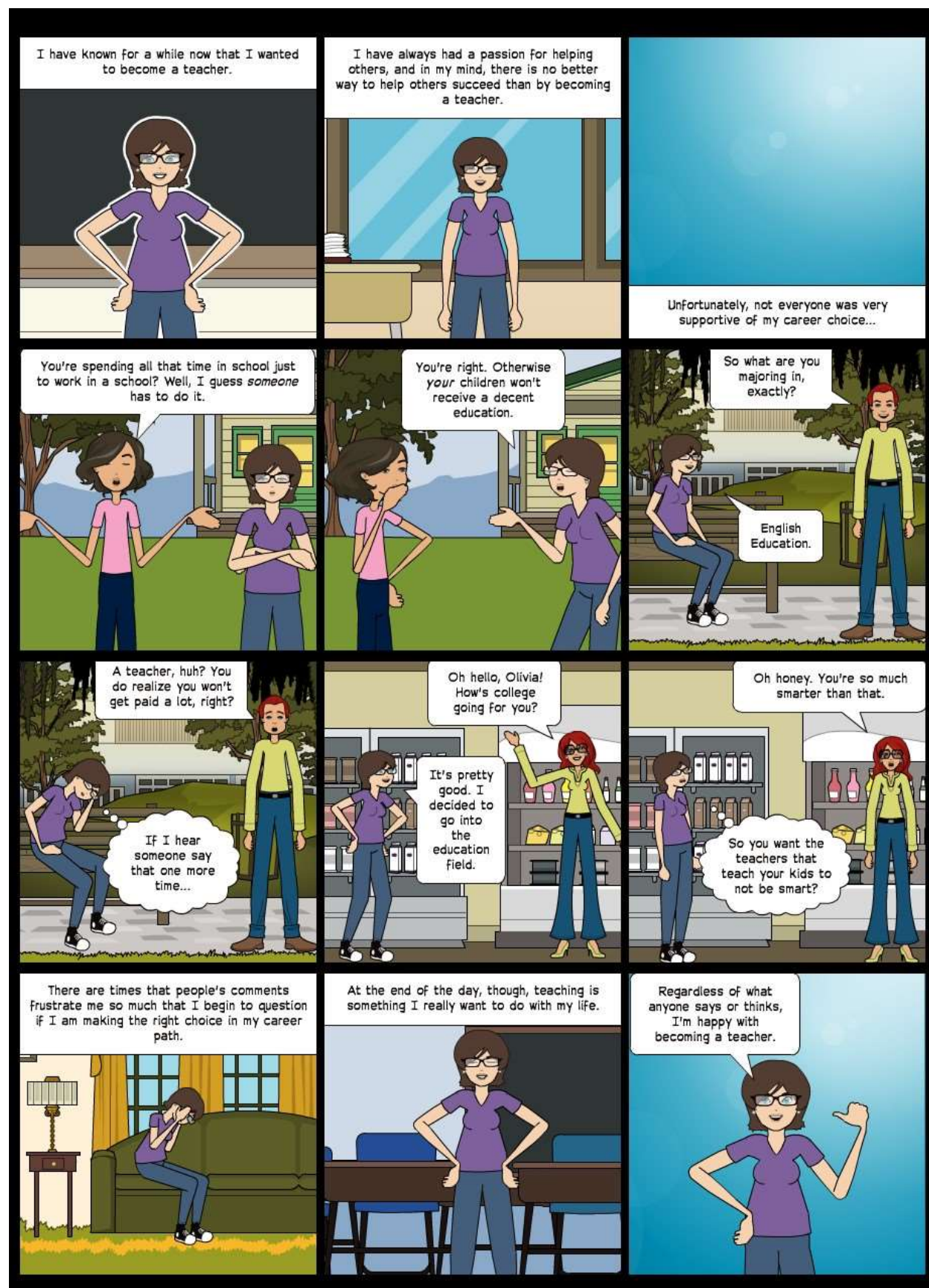
APPENDIX 3.4: “MY FIRST COMIC”

Bryant chooses to showcase his hobbies, including sports, traveling, and reading, to depict himself in a positive, self-possessed light in his cartoon.



APPENDIX 3.5: “DEALING WITH CRITICS”

Olivia, with her cartoon, shows her struggles with justifying her decision to be a high-school teacher to her family. Incidentally, teachers in our state are the lowest paid in the nation.



APPENDIX 3.6: “MY INTRODUCTION COMIC”

Through her comic, Noah, a Native American student, explores the milestones in her life, including being homeschooled, living on a farm, working at an Amish specialty food shop, and deciding to become an English major.

