

Graphic Storytellers at Work

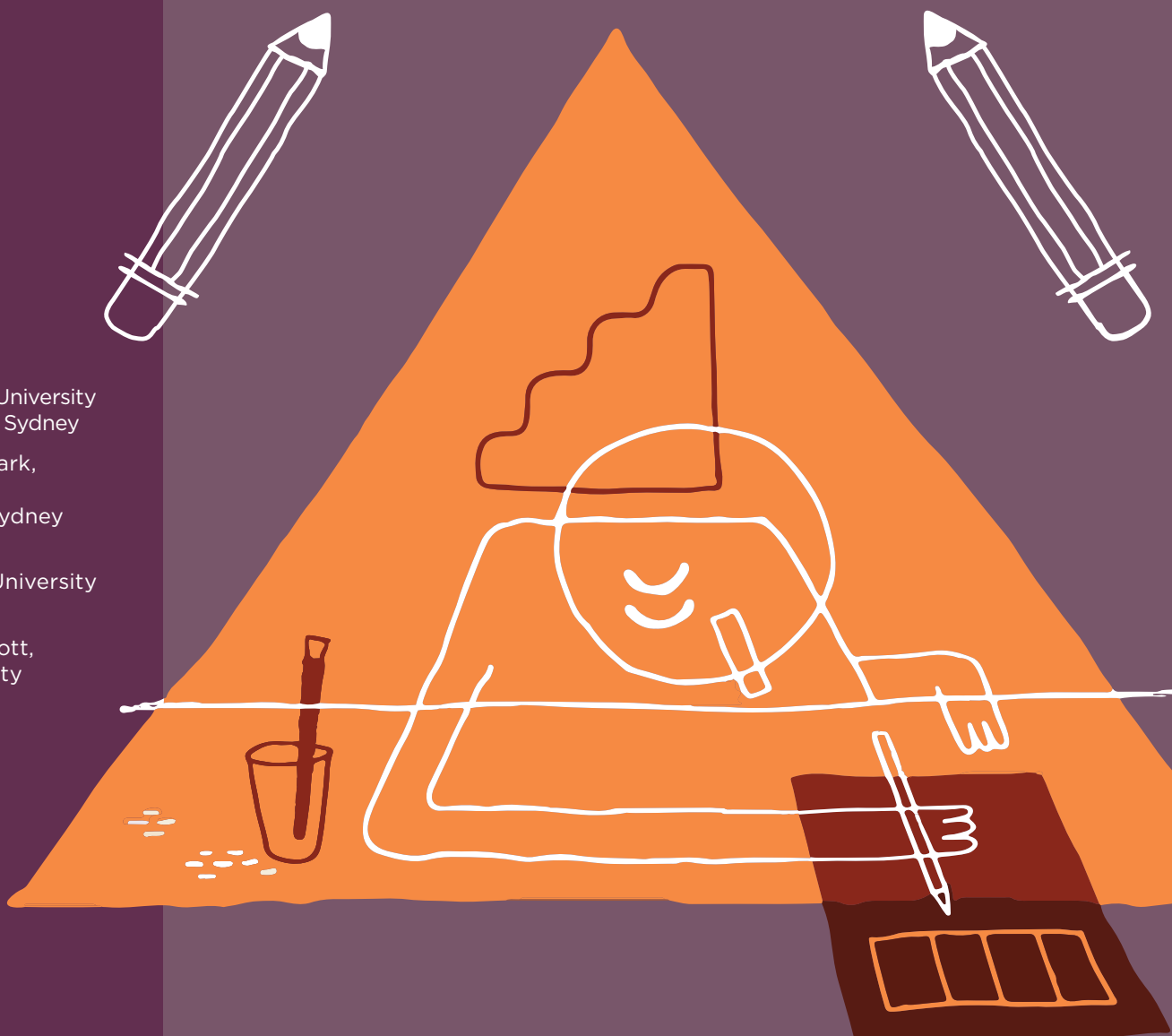
Cross-industry opportunities for cartoonists, illustrators and comics-makers

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The Australia Council for the Arts proudly acknowledges all First Nations peoples and their rich culture of the country we now call Australia. We pay respect to Elders past and present. We acknowledge First Nations peoples as Australia's First Peoples and as the Traditional Owners and custodians of the lands and waters on which we live.

We recognise and value the ongoing contribution of First Nations peoples and communities to Australian life, and how this continuation of 75,000 years of unbroken storytelling enriches us. We embrace the spirit of reconciliation, working towards ensuring an equal voice and the equality of outcomes in all aspects of our society.

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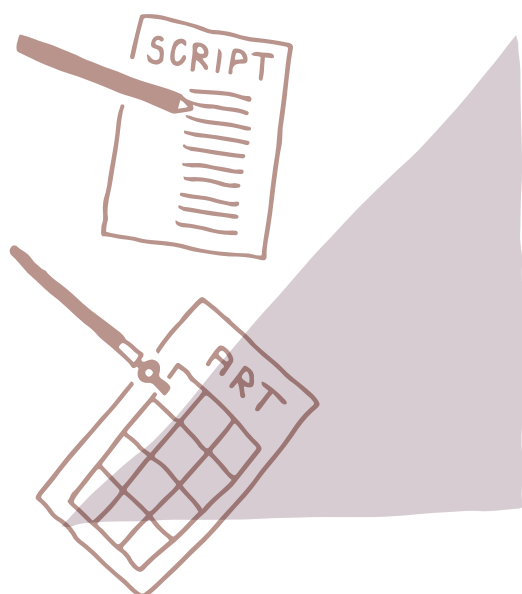
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Executive summary

Graphic storytelling is a practice with a long history in Australia's cultural margins. Comics-makers and cartoonists have made work that is defiantly DIY, expressive of a radical and anti-corporate ethos.



These artists have also played an important role as illustrators in the commercial world, contributing their skills to advertising, advocacy, art direction and public communication.

However, the landscape for graphic storytelling is changing. It appears that comics artists are increasingly in demand as creative professionals in non-traditional settings, such as medicine, contract law, organisational communications and service design, and many others.

Graphic Storytellers at Work provides a preliminary review of Australia's contemporary comics community, and some of the diverse contexts in which its artists are using and developing their skills. It aims to identify new areas of opportunity for graphic storytellers working in Australia, and the best means of supporting these artists in their creative practices and careers. The report also analyses the graphic storyteller's specific skillset, and the value this skillset has to a variety of non-arts industries.

Graphic Storytellers at Work was commissioned by the Australia Council for the Arts and led by comics-makers and comics researchers. It is based on a survey completed by 260 graphic storytellers, and interviews with graphic storytellers and their employers.



Key findings:

In new cross-industry settings, graphic storytellers are likely to be increasingly valued for interpersonal and interpretive skills. Many artists see their role as intermediaries between people in different fields with different approaches to problems and situations. Many describe their skills becoming unexpectedly useful during strategic planning or brainstorming. These artists explain how they can work ‘a kind of magic’ through live drawing while abstract, complicated or formless discussions unfold.

Many graphic storytellers are experiencing increasing demand for their skills. Of the graphic storytellers surveyed, 41% think demand for their skills is increasing. 18% think that demand is stable, and 28% of participants are not sure. Only 13% think that demand for their skills is decreasing.

Graphic storytellers are educators. 28% of survey participants describe their skills becoming useful in an educational setting, from internal organisational training to public-facing education programs. 27% of participants list ‘workshop facilitation’ in the top three sources of income from their creative practice.

Graphic storytellers are important communicators in the areas of health, safety and wellbeing. 15% of participants describe using their skills to help people and organisations communicate in health contexts, such as public health, rehabilitation or in organisational health and safety. Graphic storytellers are also attentive to body language and facial cues and have an ability to present nuanced emotional moments in a few lines. This has also prepared them for what we might call ‘empathy work’, such as situations where active listening and reflection is important.

Graphic storytellers use visual language to explain realities that do not yet exist. Graphic storytellers can become indispensable as part of the design of new products and services, particularly services that may exist in as-yet unrealised futures, or within services that require complicated user interaction.

Graphic storytellers are able to synthesise complex messages and ideas into simple combinations of lines and words. An emerging and relatively lucrative skill for graphic storytellers is in helping manage complexity through the dynamic application of visual language. One example of this is a practice called graphic recording, during which artists synthesise and record ideas – live, while a conversation or workshop is taking place.

Graphic storytelling in Australia is also attracting a younger and more gender diverse set of practitioners. Older artists are more likely to be male (85% of artists over 60 years), and younger artists are more likely to be female (54% of artists between 18–29), non-binary or transgender (19% of artists between 18–29). Graphic storytellers overwhelmingly live in big cities, where the community infrastructure for their practice largely exists.

Almost all artists surveyed attribute part of their skillset to informal training. In most cases this refers to an exchange between artists. For example, more artists cited peer-to-peer education in the form of mentorship or participation in creative community (46%) than online learning (41%). In this way, the comics-making community is critical cultural infrastructure, providing a source of education and mentorship for graphic storytellers in-training.

Graphic storytellers do not make money in the same way as other literary practitioners.

Streams of income related to traditional trade publishing such as royalties, advances, grants, prizes and speaking fees were ranked the lowest out of all possible income streams. Instead, graphic storytellers are much more likely to profit from direct interaction with readers and fans, such as art commissions, or sales of original art. When books are involved, they make much more money from direct sales than from sales facilitated by a publisher.

The life of a graphic storyteller is often a balancing act between personal projects, freelance work, day jobs and side hustles.

Half of the artists surveyed support themselves with work that is non-creative (50%). Almost half list 'lack of financial return on their practice' as one of the top two challenges for their practice (47%).

However, one in four surveyed artists make 100% of their income from creative work.

Of this group, 43% are high income earners, making over \$100,000 per year. When these high earners describe themselves and their roles, they present themselves as visual language experts. It is clear that their roles require intensive use of both technical and interpretive skills. For these artists, the ability to move quickly between thinking and doing is critical, providing access to new workplaces and emerging industries.

Across all income brackets, the combination of technical and interpretive skills is a large part of the graphic storyteller's value.

Graphic storytellers have long been employed to help organisations communicate externally with the public, e.g. in advertising, advocacy, art direction or public communication. However, this is a changing landscape. New opportunities are more likely to involve the use of visual language in internal communications, storytelling, mapping, strategic thinking and visual problem-solving.

¹ *Contemporary Australian Comics 1980–2020: A new history* is supported by an Australian Research Council Linkage grant administered by the University of Melbourne from 2021–23. Chief Investigators of the project are Dr. Elizabeth McFarlane (University of Melbourne), Dr. Ronnie Scott (RMIT), Dr. Pat Grant (UTS) and Mr. Gabriel Clark (UTS); with the Australia Council for the Arts, National Library of Australia and Craig Walker Pty Ltd as industry partners.

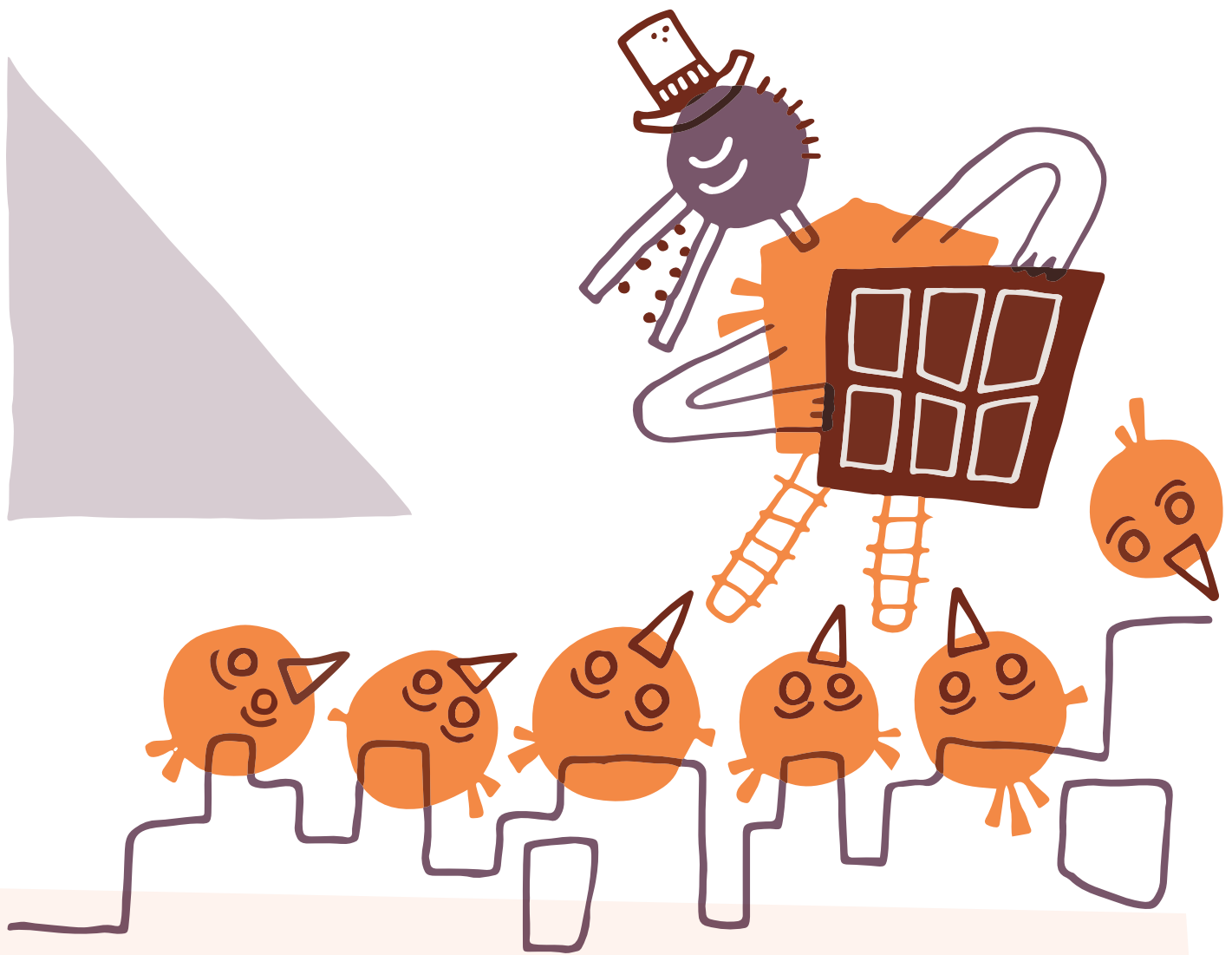


Parameters of the research

This report is focused on an informal publishing community, and non-arts contexts for graphic storytellers' work in Australia. The authors acknowledge that many graphic storytellers are working within formal book publishing, animation, community arts and other areas that align with their area of creative specialisation. These more arts-centred activities are the focus of a current three-year research project, conducted by these same authors, and titled *Contemporary Australian Comics 1980–2020: A new history*.¹

Contemporary Australian Comics 1980–2020 prioritises, documents and showcases the diversity of Australian contemporary comics, highlighting First Nations artists, artists of colour, LGBTIQ+ artists, and artists from regional Australia.

The intention of *Graphic Storytellers at Work* is not to provide a full representation of all Australians practising graphic storytelling. Instead, the research aims to highlight the public value created by graphic storytellers through the services they offer across so many professional and community contexts. It also identifies some of the opportunities that currently exist for graphic storytellers in Australia, and the ways in which informal arts infrastructure can provide a valuable base for creative training and support.



Terms and definitions

There are several commonly used terms to refer to the medium of comics and the makers of comics. The list below is to clarify what we mean by the terms used in this report.

Comic – A visual language of sequenced images and text, often incorporating elements such as panels, speech balloons, and narrative boxes.

Graphic storyteller – A comics-maker, cartoonist, illustrator, or storyboard artist who has technical image-making skills as well as literary or conceptual sensibilities.

Cartoon – An idea or scene in one image.

Graphic novel – A long-form comic bound as a book.

Comic book – A shorter comic, usually with no spine.

Webcomic – A comic made for the web and published online.

Mini-comic – A small comic self-published and hand-made with a DIY ethos.

Zine – A small-circulation self-published work of original or appropriated texts and images, usually reproduced via photocopier. A zine does not necessarily contain comics.

Zine fair – A community-run convention or swap meet for trading self-published comics, zines and merchandise, usually informed by punk and DIY cultural practices.

Comic convention – A professionalised event for marketing and trading comics and pop-culture merchandise, informed by fan culture and mass media/entertainment.

Introduction

There is a long history of comics-making in Australia. However, this has not had broad visibility as a literary practice. While in countries such as France and Japan comics are understood as a national literary form, in Australia comics-making is predominantly an underground practice.

It is enmeshed in and sustained by a devoted community of practitioners, readers and fans. Occasionally in Australia, a text or an artist may temporarily attract attention with a major graphic novel release, or a well-publicised show or festival. However, by and large this community operates out of the range of the literary or pop-culture mainstream.

This study was prompted by anecdotal evidence within Australia's comics community that its artists are increasingly in demand as creative professionals in non-traditional settings. These settings included medicine, contract law, organisational communications and service design, but also many others. At first analysis, it appeared that the underground, and largely unpaid, practice of making comics has equipped writers and artists with a rare and unusual skillset. And this skillset is now apparently in demand, in all sorts of industries outside of the traditional spaces of media and commercial art.

We wanted to know: where are comics-makers working? What are the skills in these artists' skillset? How is this skillset being identified? How is it being used? Does it come from producing work in the medium itself, or the culture and community around it, or a mix of both? And what if we expanded our focus to include others who share in this skillset – such as illustrators, storyboard artists and cartoonists – and considered the contributions made by 'graphic storytellers' more broadly defined?

Graphic Storytellers at Work was commissioned by the Australia Council to investigate these questions. The research was led by comics-makers and comics researchers, and progressed in collaboration with the Australia Council's research team. The research draws on knowledge and relationships that are part of the graphic storytelling community and this report presents findings for a wider audience.

The project included a survey of Australian graphic storytellers, and ten semi-structured interviews leading to three case studies of artist-client relationships. Building from the experience of practising artists, the research aims:

- to better understand the **demographic make-up** of graphic storytellers in Australia
- to analyse **the unique skillset** that artists develop through the practice of making comics
- to investigate **the ways and places** through which graphic storytellers **learn and deploy their craft**.

The case studies complement these findings with insights into emerging professional **relationships between graphic storytellers and non-arts industries**.

Through studying the context of skills development for graphic storytellers, and the applicability of those skills to non-arts industries, **the project identifies new areas of opportunity for graphic storytellers working in Australia**.

Methodology

This study collected information through:

- **an online survey of Australian graphic storytellers** that pulled together statistical and qualitative responses from 260 people who identified as having the graphic storyteller's skillset
- **ten semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews** with graphic storytellers and their employers covering specific instances of graphic storytellers working in a cross-industry setting. These resulted in:
 - > **three case studies** of artist-client relationships
 - > **two industry spotlight** sections.



The survey

The research was led by comics-makers and comics researchers: Pat Grant, Gabriel Clark, Elizabeth MacFarlane and Ronnie Scott. All four are active within the Australian graphic storytelling community and are based in either Melbourne or Sydney.

Survey participants were sourced by circulating the survey through the creative community of graphic storytellers, readers and fans, with the assistance of key contacts in this network.

Prior to implementing the survey, a long list of some 460 graphic storytellers currently working in Australia was compiled. Each artist on the list was approached personally and asked to participate by a member of the research team. 430 conducted the survey (with 260 completing all questions including those that required a qualitative response). Participants were asked about the work they are doing in cross-industry settings and the particulars of their skillset in these contexts. They were also asked to provide demographic and financial data, along with information about their creative practice.

The interviews

The information collected through long-form interviews describes in more specific detail the kinds of work that graphic storytellers are doing in industries outside the arts.

Interviews were conducted in pairs or groups — one with the artist or artists, and one with the client or employer — to find out about the work that was done, the skills that were used and the qualities of the working relationship. The aim here was to narrate the emerging relationships between artists and employers, and chart their origins, their benefits and challenges. Ten interviews were conducted with practitioners working in distinctly different industries. The information collected has been summarised and presented in the form of three narrative case studies and two smaller 'industry spotlight' sections.



The graphic storyteller's community

Since the early 1990s, critics, scholars and comics-makers have worked hard to reframe comics as a literary language, working against broad misunderstandings of graphic storytelling as a genre aimed at children or subliterary adults.

There is consensus among these scholars that the language of comics is capable of presenting complex human experiences in unique ways.²

Comics take a unique combination of skills to make. Writers of comics need to think visually, illustrators need to work quickly and expressively, and inkers and colourists need to work clearly and empathetically to translate and 'finish' another artist's work. While some comics are collaborative, many comics-makers undertake all these roles, from concept to execution, to production

and marketing. Throughout this study, we call this combination of multidisciplinary skills **'the graphic storyteller's skillset'**.

Comics-making is a practice with a long history of development in the cultural margins. This includes comics artists making work in the shadow of more 'respectable' art forms; Australian artists making work for smaller audiences than their peers on other continents; and work that is defiantly DIY, self-published and independent, growing out of a radical and anti-corporate ethos.³



2 See McCloud S 1993, *Understanding Comics*; Groensteen T 2007, *The System of Comics* (trans. Beaty B and Nguyen N); and Chute H 2017, *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere*.

3 For insights into many issues facing comics-makers today, including instability of cultural place, see David Blumenstein's 2019 survey of the Australian Cartoonists' Association membership and the wider 'cartooning/comics/illustration industry': <http://www.cartoonists.org.au/blog/2019/04/30/aca-survey>.



This means that comics-makers come from a creative community often focussed on storytelling for entertainment and self-expression. An important way of understanding the world of comics in Australia is, in fact, to move beyond an appreciation of its vibrant cultural outputs, and to recognise the network of devoted community members who build and sustain its **cultural infrastructure**.⁴

This cultural infrastructure does not exist primarily to facilitate financial transactions or the commodification of artworks. Instead its key purpose is to support exchange and interaction between artists and fans who use it to build relationships, share skills, and influence each other's practices. This ecology is maintained without significant inflow of funding from big institutions, or high volumes of sales from a substantial market of readers.

So, what did our survey tell us about the makeup of this community?

Who are the people who share the 'graphic storyteller's skillset'?

And how do they use this skillset in Australia's non-arts industries?



⁴ See Amy L Maynard's work on Australian comics as a creative industry that operates as a strategically deployed ecology of clusters and scenes, in the University of Adelaide doctoral thesis 'A Scene in Sequence: Australian comics production as a creative industry 1975-2017' (2017), and in 'For the Love of Craft: Industry, Identity and Australian Comics', in *Cultures of Comics Work*, eds. Brienza C and Johnston P 2016.

Demographic information

Age

Graphic storytellers in Australia tend to be young.

About half of our participants were in the 30-44 age bracket (49%) and a quarter were in the 18-29 age bracket (26%). Older artists are less represented in this creative community.

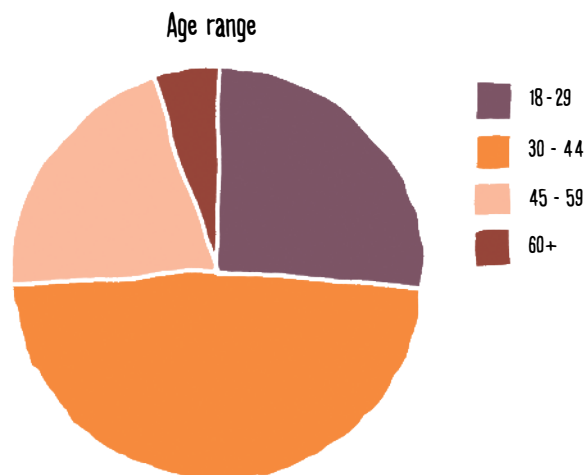


Figure 1

Gender

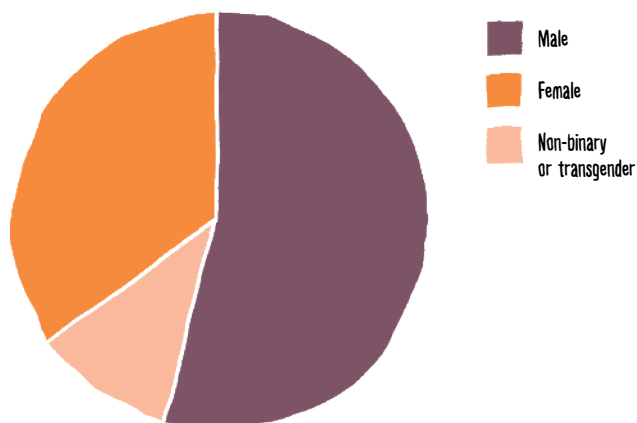


Figure 2

Gender

Graphic storytellers in Australia are moving towards gender diversity.

54% of our participants identified as male, 36% as female, and 10% as non-binary or transgender.

Older artists are more likely to be male, and younger artists are more likely to be female, non-binary or transgender.

The vast majority of artists over 60 are male (85%); and in both the 45-59 years and 30-44 years age groups, men make up about two thirds of those surveyed (66% and 65% respectively).

Only 27% of surveyed artists aged 18 to 29 identified as male. 54% identified as female and 19% identified as non-binary or transgender.

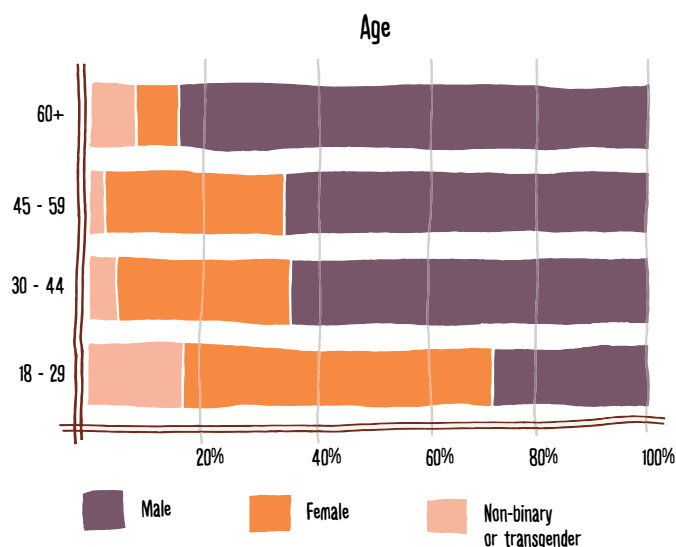


Figure 3

Ethnicity and identity

Most graphic storytellers in Australia identify as being of European descent.

We asked graphic storytellers to describe their ethnicity in a 'free text' question and got complicated results.

One thing we do know is that this community of graphic storytellers is overwhelmingly white: 68% identified explicitly as being of European descent.

17% of artists identified as being of mixed ethnicity or as People of Colour.

Only 1.2% of graphic storytellers identified as Indigenous, which is well below the 3% representation of First Nations people in the Australian population.

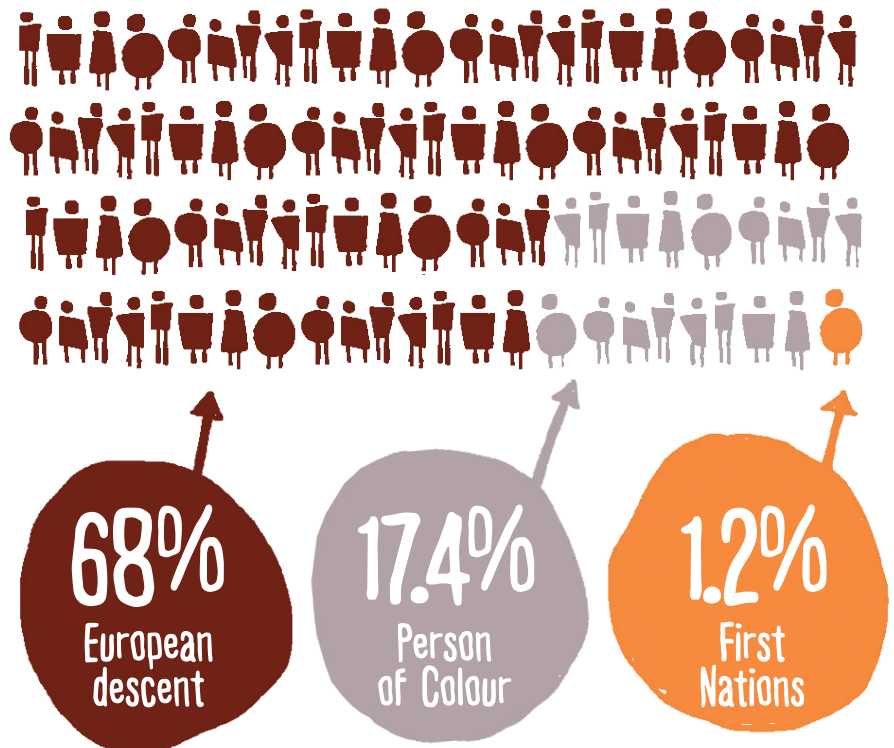
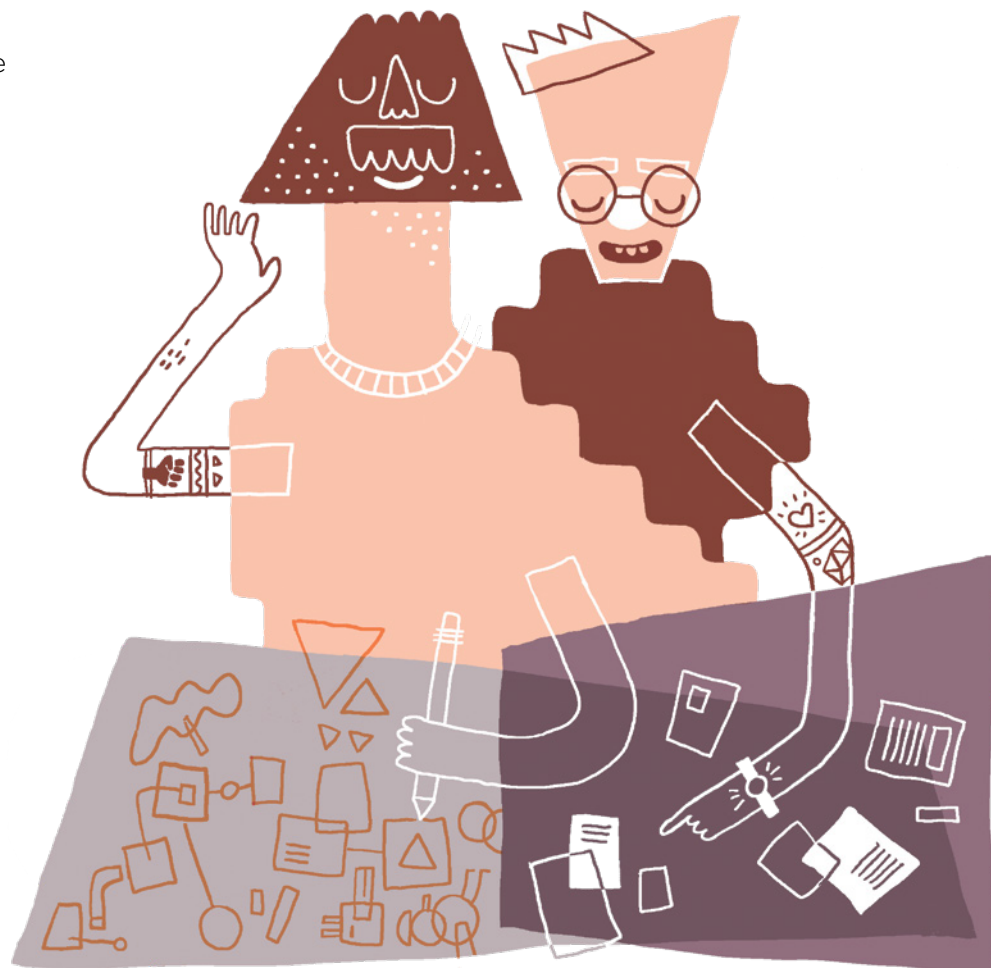


Figure 4



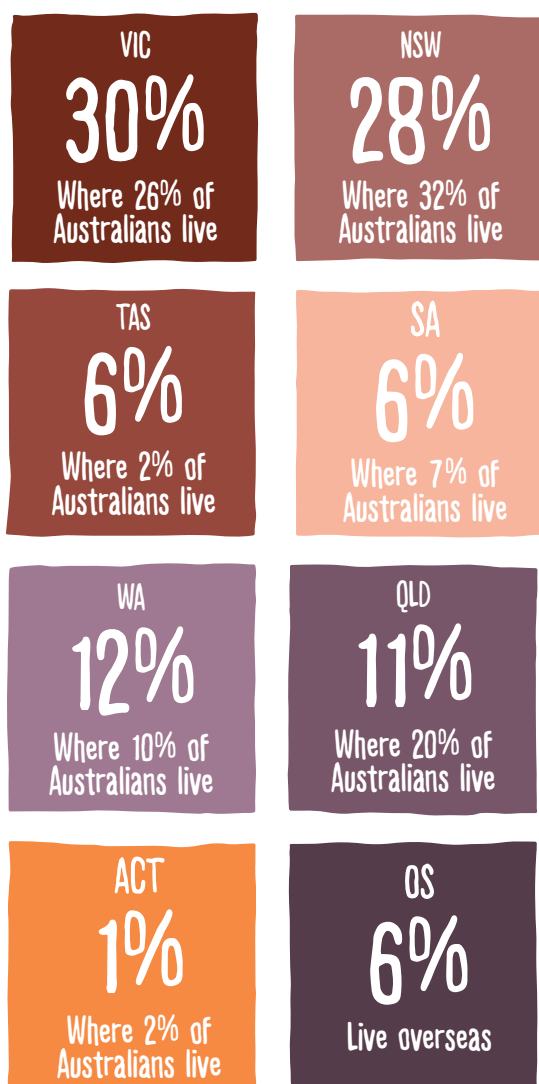


Figure 5

Location

Graphic storytellers in Australia mostly live in cities and suburbs.

In line with the Australian population overall, most Australian graphic storytellers live in Eastern states with big urban centres. While this art form is highly accessible, our research suggests that take-up is catalysed by community infrastructure, which is concentrated in Sydney and Melbourne in particular.

There are greener pastures overseas.

We asked graphic storytellers some questions about creative opportunities overseas.

Around 6% of graphic storytellers participating in this community are Australians living overseas. Two thirds of these Australian expats said that they moved overseas to find new opportunities in their field.

About the same number of people — 6% of the artists participating in the graphic storyteller community — are artists from overseas living in Australia. Only about a quarter of this group told us that they came here for opportunities in their creative field. The other three quarters came for other reasons.

The community across borders



Figure 6

Finances

Income profile

Most graphic storytellers in Australia are low income earners.

One in two Australian graphic storytellers live close to or below Australia's median income of \$48,360 per year⁵ and one in three live close to or below the poverty line of 50% of median income, or \$24,180 per year.⁶

This aligns broadly with the national median income for Australian artists which, when all creative and other earning is combined, comes to \$42,200.⁷

However, one in eight graphic storytellers falls into the higher income bracket, making more than \$100,000 per annum.

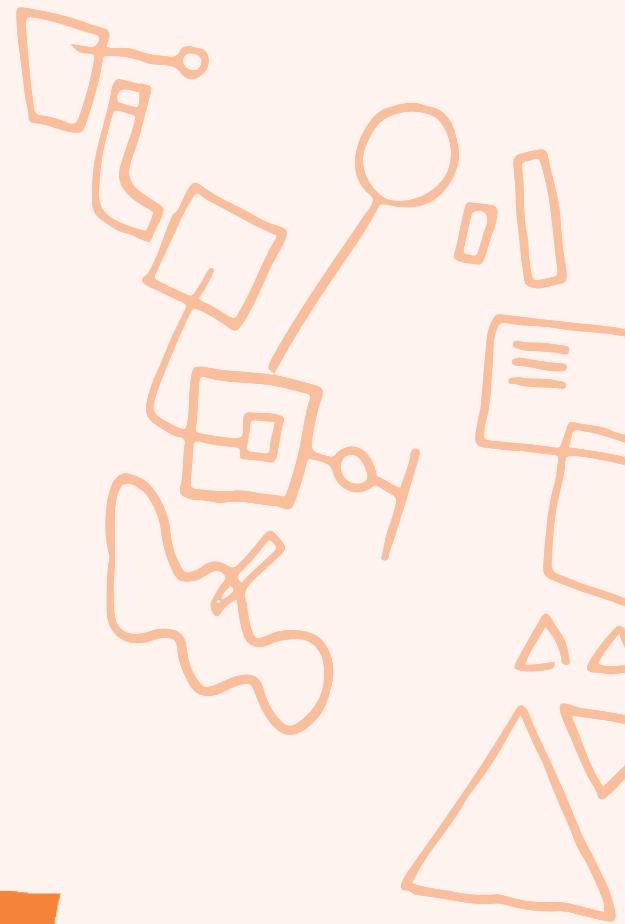


Figure 7

⁵ According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics for 2016-17, Personal Income in Australia.

⁶ According to OECD standards for single Australians.

⁷ Throsby D & Petetskaya K 2017, *Making Art Work: An economic study of professional artists in Australia*, p.78.

How much of graphic storytellers' income comes from creative work?

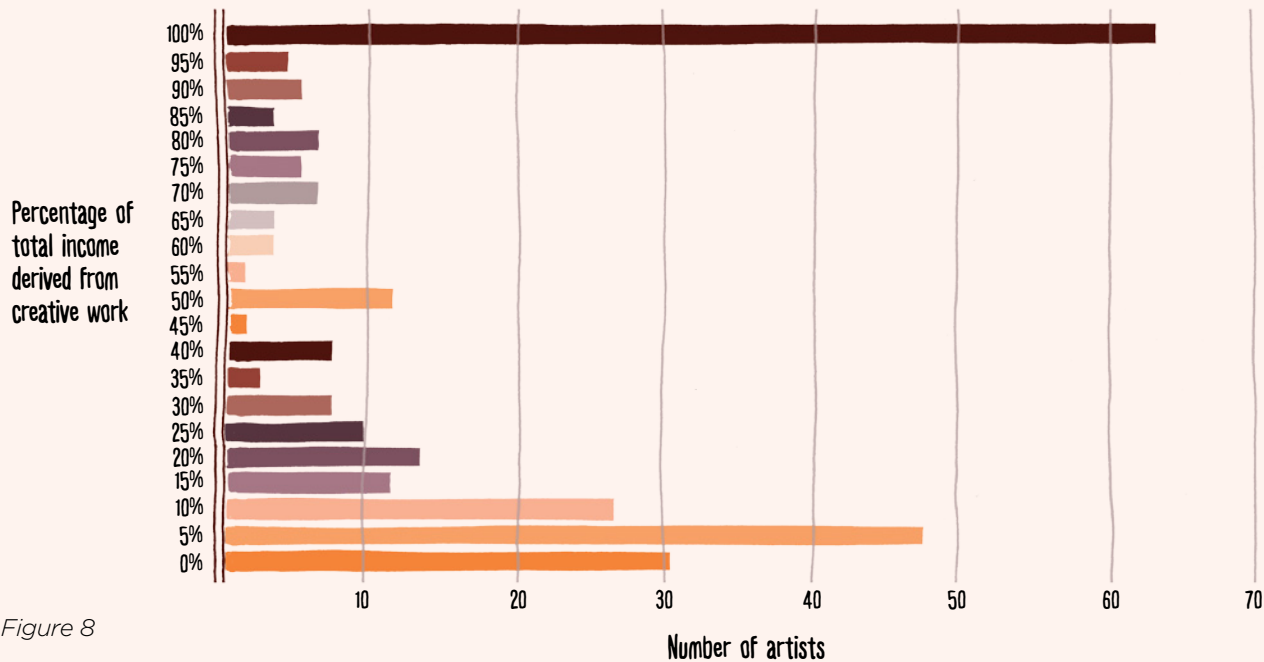


Figure 8

Income sources

Around a quarter of Australian graphic storytellers make their entire income from creative work.

We asked graphic storytellers how much of their income was generated from creative work over the last three years. 11% said they generated no income at all from creative work and just under half (48%) said that they make less than 20% of their income from creative work.

There is, however, a spike at the opposite end of the graph (see Figure 8). This spike represents artists who said they make 100% of their income from creative work. This was actually the most common response in the survey and came from around one quarter of participants.

Of those who make 100% of their income from creative work, 43% are high income earners, making more than \$100K per year. See page 37 for more on this high earning group and the skills they use in their work.

We looked at the relationship between income brackets and the proportion of income made from creative work (see Figure 9). The small group of graphic storytellers who make the most money are more likely than others to make all or most of that money from creative practice. Similarly, the large group of artists who make the least money overall tend to generate a smaller

Over the last three years, what percentage of your total income was made from your creative practice?

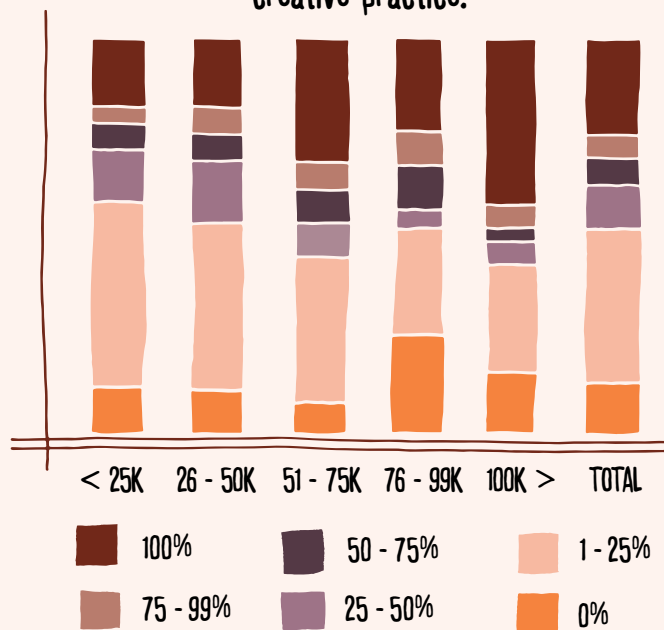


Figure 9

percentage of their income from their creative skills. In the middle-income range of \$75-\$99K there is a spike in artists who made no money from their creative work. We attribute this to the small size of this particular group.

Industry spotlight A:

Service design

Service design, otherwise known as user experience design, is an emerging industry. When organisations launch a new product or service, they consult with service design experts to help them understand what the experience of the new product or service might be like for future users.

Service design consultants draw on a variety of visual storytelling forms to help describe and convey user experiences, which organisations then use to make decisions about their products, services and marketing strategies. It is a space where graphic storytellers have become essential.

Kernow Craig runs a design firm called Craig Walker Design which specialises in service design. One of the graphic storytellers Kernow employs is John-Henry Pajak. John-Henry fell in love with comics while he was at art school, made comics for his university magazine, and later found work storyboarding films for advertising. Now, in his role as a graphic storyteller for service design, John-Henry uses a kind of comic called a journey map to explain the way a real person might interact with a complex situation.

John-Henry and Kernow find that visual storytelling can give decision-makers easy access to the emotional and physical experience that people might have when they start using a new system or product.



'We use visual language to make something real that isn't real yet,' says Kernow. 'Or to explain a reality that doesn't exist yet.'

There are other, more conventional, ways to visualise ideas and processes but they can sometimes be dry, clinical, overly technical or transactional. The visual stories that John-Henry and Kernow tell use the unique language of comics to explain complex concepts, combined with the friendliness and personality of contemporary illustration. These stories can bring genuine empathy, emotion, tone and expression to the demonstration of user experiences, giving organisations the best chance to immerse themselves in the possibilities of their products and services.

John-Henry is one example of a comics-maker who has found ways to use his unique artistic skillset in a flourishing emerging industry.



'We use visual language to make something real that isn't real yet. Or to explain a reality that doesn't exist yet.'

Income satisfaction

Graphic storytellers want to find ways of earning more.

We asked graphic storytellers how satisfied they were with the income they had generated from their creative work. The results swayed heavily towards the negative, with 65% answering this question with 'unsatisfied' or 'very unsatisfied'. Only 17% said they were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the income they make from their creative practice.

When we grouped these responses into income brackets, we found a direct relationship between this satisfaction metric and overall income. In other words, those who are more financially comfortable are much more likely to be satisfied with their creative income.

Satisfaction with creative income

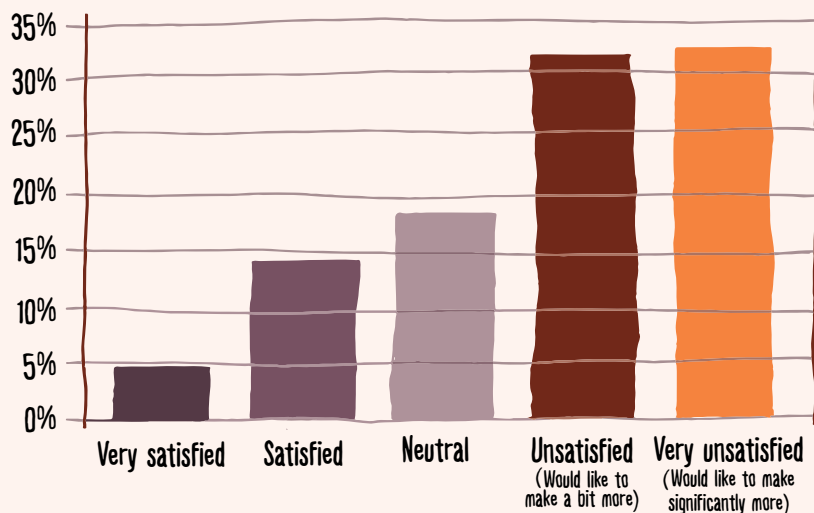


Figure 10

Income satisfaction grouped by income

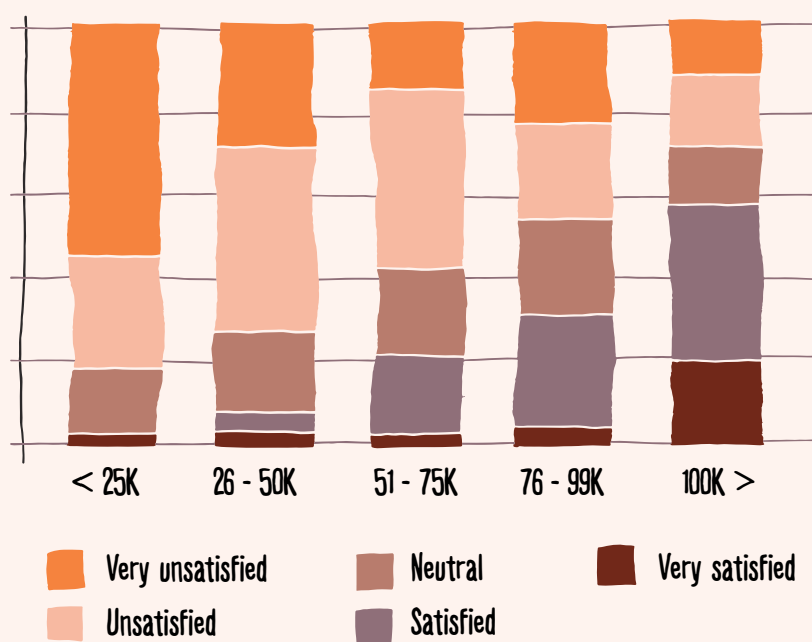
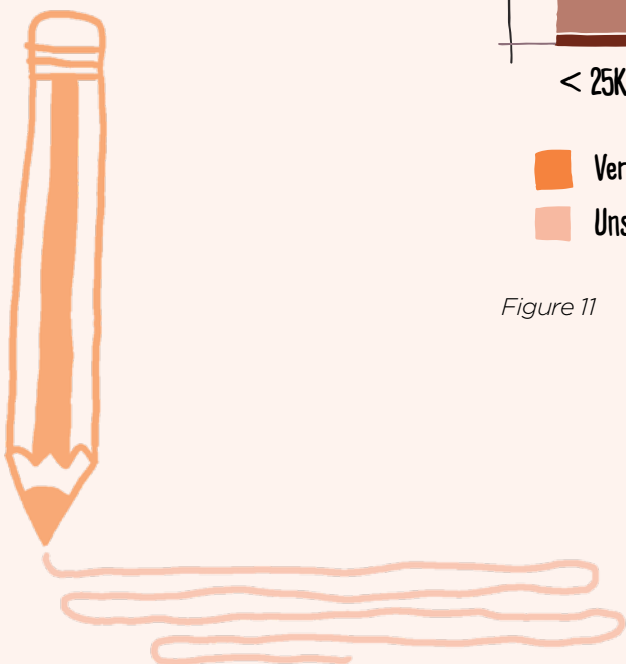


Figure 11



Day jobs and side hustles

The life of a graphic storyteller is often a balancing act between personal projects, freelance work, day jobs and side hustles.

About 50% of the graphic storytellers surveyed support themselves with work that is non-creative. These artists are spread relatively evenly across income brackets. Those in the highest and lowest income brackets are slightly less likely to have a day job than those in the middle-income brackets. In other words, the decision to take on a day job is not necessarily a decision to move up or down between different income brackets.

We also asked graphic storytellers how much of their time they spend on creative work. The responses demonstrated a relatively even spread from five hours a week to more than fifty, with an overall average of thirty-four hours per week. Statistically there were no dominant responses to this question.

About half of the hours spent on creative work are for client work or work for others, and the other half is spent working on their own personal projects. Each artist must find an individual balance between non-creative work, paid creative work and personal creative work.

However, we did find that the decision to support oneself with a day job over working full-time as a graphic storyteller has a powerful influence on the kind of work that a given artist produces. In the chart below we compared responses to two questions. The first question asked about the percentage of time artists spent on personal work as opposed to client work or freelance work. The second asked whether or not they had a day job. When mapped together a trend becomes clear.

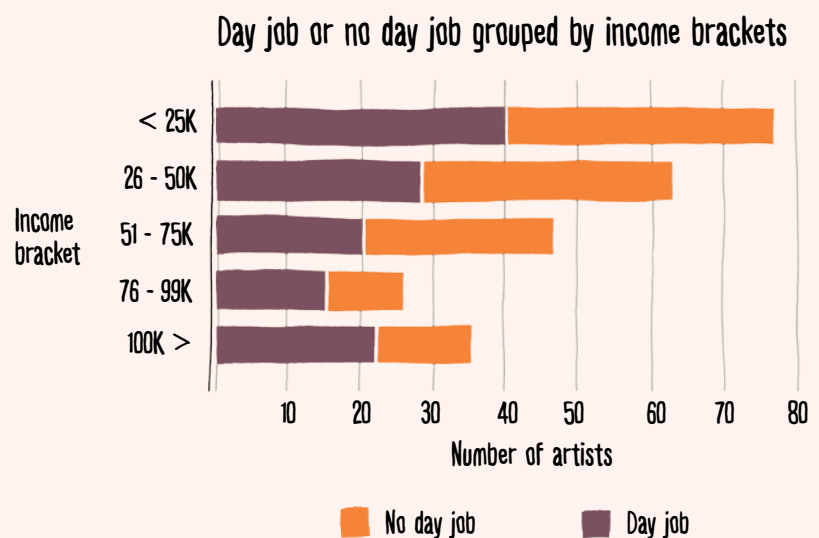


Figure 12

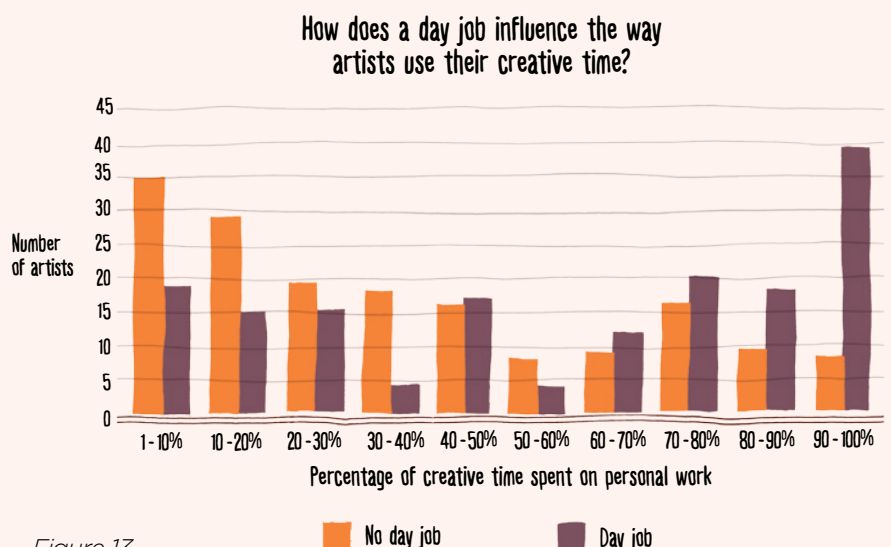


Figure 13



This chart suggests the stability and routine of a day job allows a graphic storyteller to take on the role of author or creator rather than a specialist or technician. A day job can enable an artist to take on ambitious personal work, such as a long-running webcomic, an auteur comics series or an original graphic novel.

Graphic storytellers with day jobs are less likely to be doing client work or freelance work and more likely to be setting the agenda for their creative time.

Different artists, different balances

Freelancer Freda	Day Job Denise	Side Hustle Sabine
Freda makes a living creating art for the comics community. She makes commissioned illustrations, portraits, fan art and sometimes gets paid to work on comics at a page rate. She is very proud that she works full time in comics but she finds it hard to find time to work on her own projects. Freda is a low income earner.	Denise gets up at 5 a.m. every day to draw comics for three hours before starting her day job as a legal clerk. Denise only works creatively on her own personal projects and she makes a moderate income.	Sabine has professionalised her graphic storyteller skillset and runs a business supporting various NGOs and organisations. This allows her large blocks of time to work on her own graphic novel in between intensive blocks of demanding client work. Sabine is in the higher income bracket.



Different artists different balances

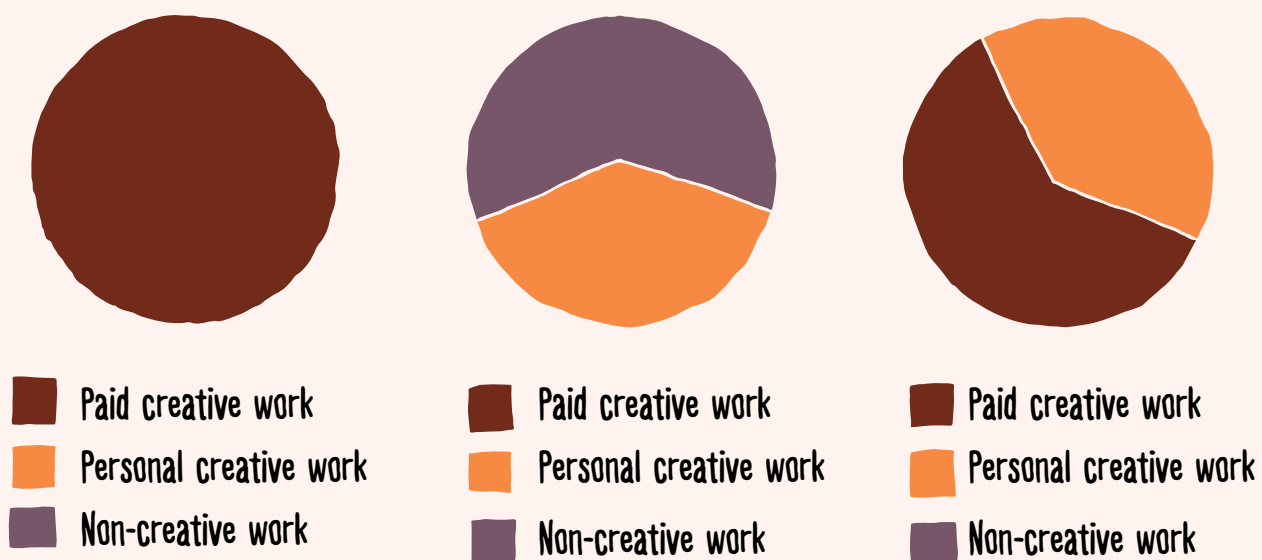


Figure 14

Income streams

Graphic storytellers profit from the direct line of contact they have with their community.

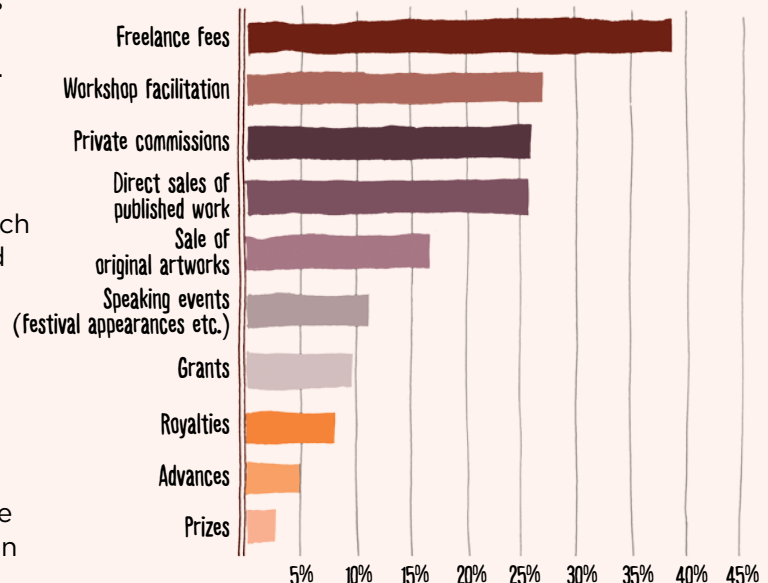
When we asked graphic storytellers to list their sources of income and rank them in terms of earning capacity, we saw they are already making more money in roles as freelancers and educators than they are from their roles as artists or authors.

Graphic storytellers do not make money in the same way as other literary practitioners. In fact, streams of income related to traditional trade publishing such as royalties, advances, grants, prizes and speaking fees were ranked the lowest out of all possible income streams.

Instead, graphic storytellers are much more likely to profit from direct interaction with readers and fans, such as art commissions, or sales of original art. When books are involved, they make much more money from direct sales than from sales facilitated by a publisher.

This insight speaks again to the importance of community. Events such as zine fairs and comic conventions offer skills development, but they also create opportunities for generating real income.

Can you rank your creative income streams in order of their earning capacity?



(Figure shows the percentage of artists who ranked each income stream in their top three)

Figure 15

Caregiving

Around a third of graphic storytellers are also caregivers.

28% of our survey participants said they have a responsibility to care for a child or someone in their family. While several artists cited caregiving as a challenge to their creative life, we found no statistical evidence that caregiving responsibilities influence the amount of time artists spend on their creative practice.

Artists in the higher income brackets are slightly more likely to be caregivers than artists in the lower income brackets. This may be attributed to age, as more than 50% of the artists in the lower income brackets are under 30 and perhaps less likely to be starting families.

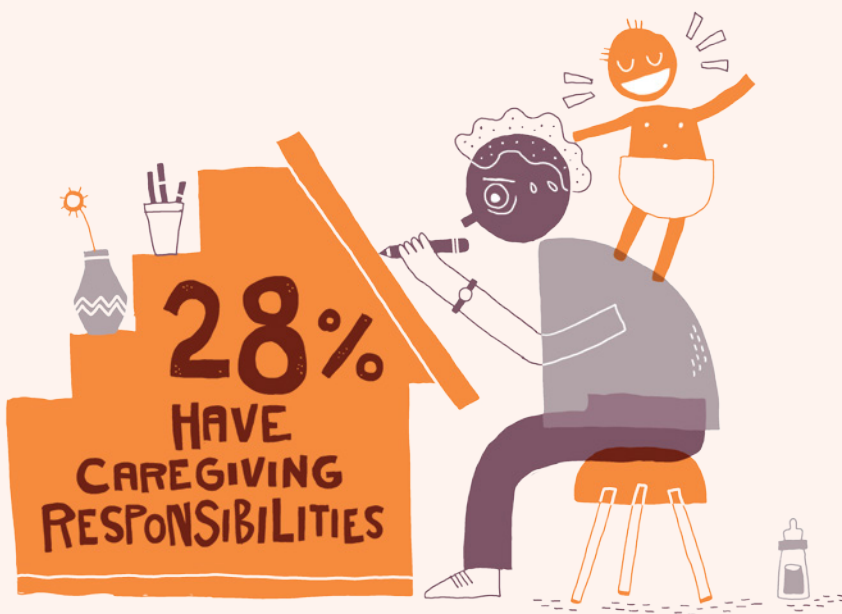


Figure 16

Financial support

While graphic storytellers receive some government and non-government support for their practice, they also receive financial support from their community.

Half (50%) of the graphic storytellers surveyed said they had never received outside financial support for their practice. Just over one quarter (26%) said they had received government grants of some kind.

While we do not have comparable data, these figures can be considered alongside the national averages for working artists. Between 2010–2015 alone, more than one third (35%) of Australian artists received a grant, prize or funding of any kind.⁸ In this same period, more than a quarter (28%) of Australian artists received a grant, prize or funding from one or more government sources.⁹

However, over one fifth (21%) of the graphic storytellers surveyed said they had received support through crowdfunding platforms. This is significantly higher than the 9% national average for all artists for the years between 2010–2015. During these years, only 11% of Australian artists sought support from crowdfunding, and 79% of these were successful.¹⁰

Government support for graphic storytellers



Figure 17

Government grant – 15% of graphic storytellers said they have received funding from state government, 12% from local government and 11% from the federal government.

Other sources of institutional support

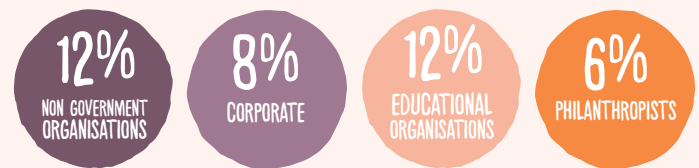


Figure 18

Non-government grants – 12% of graphic storytellers said they had received funds from NGOs, 12% said they had been funded by educational institutions, 8% said they had been funded by the corporate sector, and 6% percent said they had been funded by philanthropy.

⁸ These results relate to a grant, prize or funding from one or more of the following sources: Australia Council; Other Commonwealth Government scheme; State/Territory Government; Local Government; Educational institution; Private foundation; Arts organisation, company or industry body; Individual philanthropist/patron; Other.

⁹ These results relate to a grant, prize or funding from one or more of the following sources: Australia Council; Other Commonwealth Government scheme; State/Territory Government; Local Government; Educational institution.

¹⁰ Throsby D & Petetskaya K 2017, *Making Art Work: An economic study of professional artists in Australia*, p.109.



Challenges to practice

Graphic storytellers face a range of significant challenges in advancing their creative careers.

We asked graphic storytellers to list the biggest challenges they had in their creative careers, and then to rank them in terms of significance.

A lack of financial return on one's practice, and lack of time to work on creative projects, are the top two challenges for the graphic storytellers we surveyed. These are also the top two challenges for Australian artists across all art forms.¹¹

In other words, although graphic storytelling enjoys a growing reputational profile in Australia and increasingly attracts a younger and more diverse demographic, comics-makers face similar challenges to finding income, time, opportunity, access, and public recognition as other professional and practising artists in Australia.

In this survey, the question regarding 'lack of public support' was formulated to address a once-common perception in the comics community that their art form was not respected by cultural establishments, readers and funding bodies. However, these results suggest that public opinion is not seen as a major challenge for the contemporary graphic storytelling community, and that this wider context for their work has apparently changed.



Challenges to practice



Figure 19

¹¹ Throsby D and Petetskaya K 2017, *Making Art Work: An economic study of professional artists in Australia*, p.47.

Demand for creative skills

We asked graphic storytellers if they thought the demand for their skillset in non-arts industries was increasing or decreasing over the previous decade.

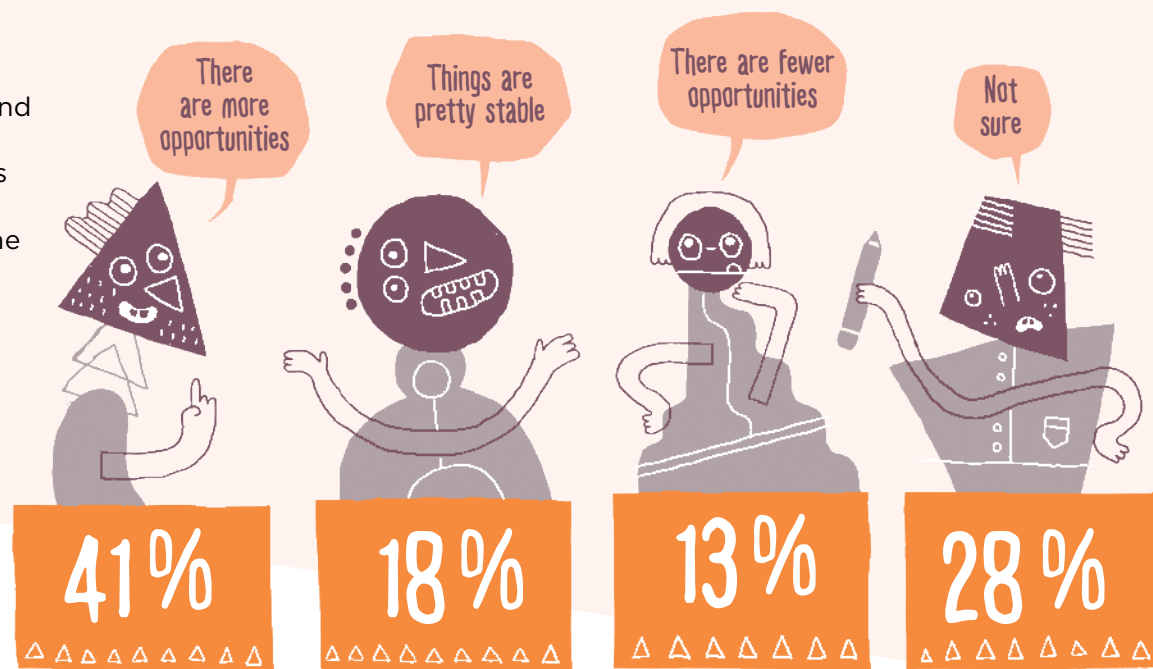


Figure 20

Practice retention

In general, graphic storytellers are in it for the long haul.

We asked graphic storytellers how long they had been making comics.

Our study reveals that practice retention is high. For example, there are almost as many artists who have been working in comics for over 25 years as there are artists who have just begun working in comics in the past two years.

Just over half of the practitioners have been making comics for less than ten years, and more than 20% of practitioners have been working in comics for more than 20 years.

Graphic storytelling in Australia is attracting a younger and more gender diverse set of practitioners. While this data implies this group are likely to continue making comics, it does not account for new or shifting challenges to practice retention.

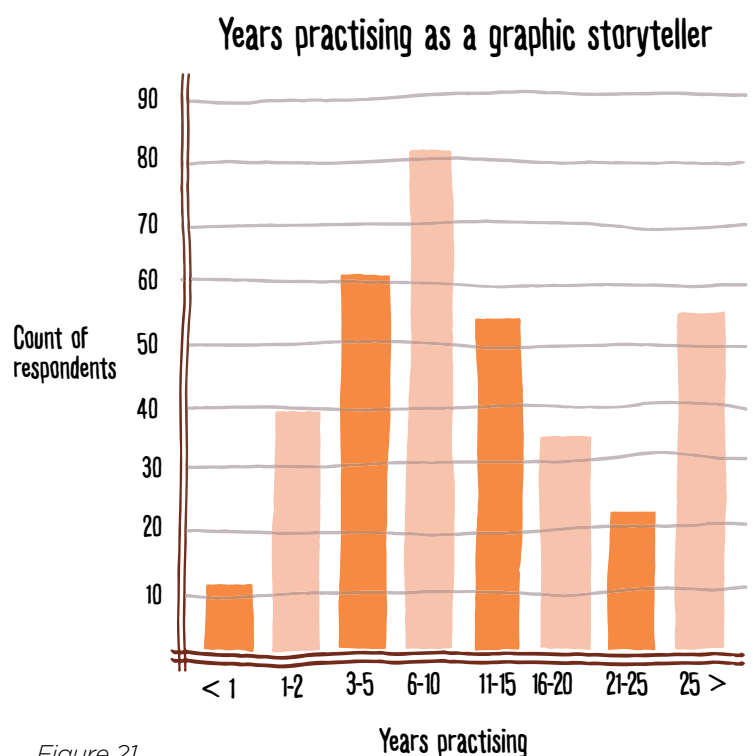


Figure 21

Education

Graphic storytellers are often self-taught and community-taught.

About one in two graphic storytellers have had formal training in a university or TAFE in a creative field and about one in eight have postgraduate qualifications.

90% of the artists we surveyed describe some of their key skills as self-taught. This is significantly more than the 65% average for Australian artists, across all art forms, who identify self-training as part of their skills development.¹²

50% attribute a university program or formal course to the development of some of their skills, but crucially only 3% cite formal training as their *only* source of learning. This tells us that practitioners in this art form are not primarily seeking out institutional expertise to develop or complete their skillset.

Almost all participants attribute part of their skillset to informal training. What does this informal learning look like? In most cases it looks like an exchange between artists. For example, more artists cite peer-to-peer education in the form of mentorship or participation in creative community (46%) than cite online learning (41%).

Education

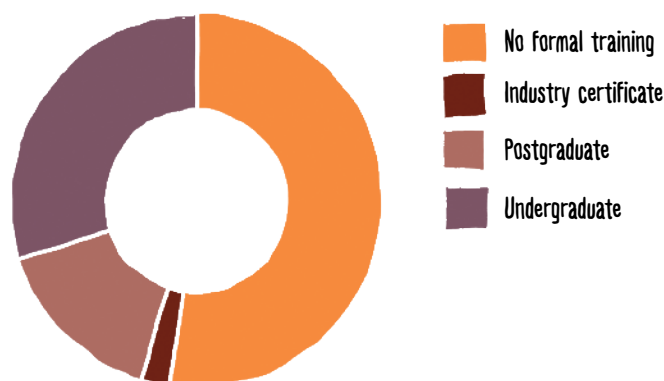


Figure 22

Across the wider arts sector, 62% of artists report learning while 'on the job', indicating a broader context of informal training in artistic pursuits.¹³

This community is very likely to be self-taught, or to have been informally trained, coached or mentored by other practitioners. This speaks again to the value of infrastructure and community outside of traditional institutions.



¹² Throsby D and Petetskaya K 2017, *Making Art Work: An economic study of professional artists in Australia*, p.36.

¹³ Throsby D and Petetskaya K 2017, *Making Art Work: An economic study of professional artists in Australia*, p.36.

Industry spotlight B:

Graphic recording and graphic facilitation

When we asked those surveyed to describe a situation where their comics-making was useful in an industry outside the arts, a number of participants described a practice called **graphic recording**. Also known as **sketch-noting** or **graphic facilitation**, this service is increasingly popular with organisations and businesses.



The practice requires a graphic storyteller to sit in on a meeting, workshop or seminar and use their skills for a kind of **visual minute-taking**. The newly formed Graphic Recorders Australia network describes graphic recording as *'the process of visually capturing content, in real time, using a combination of words, shapes, symbols and imagery.'*

Surveyed artists told us about how they applied their graphic storytelling skillset to the practice of graphic recording. One artist said, *'My ability to listen, synthesise and distil discussions into graphic recordings has been used to help influence policy, strategic change and community consultations on so many projects!'* Another said, *'I used my Illustration, analysis, communication and problem-solving skills to help a not-for-profit organisation develop its strategic plan. Listening to the board and helping everyone to gain an idea of the different perspectives through mind maps and data visualisation.'*

When graphic recording an event, the artist may be there to simply produce a record of the proceedings. However other

graphic recorders see themselves as **active participants** or **co-facilitators in a discussion** – far more than visual minute-takers or even documentarians. In our survey, artists described themselves listening carefully and generating new and site-specific visual metaphors and diagrams. This visual language can help to frame, contextualise and articulate the discussion in real time.

Graphic recorders told us that their practice helps organisations from all sorts of industries create productive and memorable meetings. They are particularly useful in situations when a lot of information is presented and different perspectives are shared. The visual language helps the participants to connect to information, 'see' it with a sense of immediacy, and retain it for the future. As one artist put it, *'Ideas are clarified and visible to everyone in the room. Once the facts are clear, decisions often reveal themselves.'*

'My ability to listen, synthesise and distil discussions into graphic recordings has been used to help influence policy, strategic change and community consultations on so many projects!'



'I used my Illustration, analysis, communication and problem-solving skills to help a not-for-profit organisation develop its strategic plan. Listening to the board and helping everyone to gain an idea of the different perspectives through mind maps and data visualisation.'



The graphic storyteller's skillset

A changing landscape

What do graphic storytellers *do*? What can they offer to organisations and businesses across all kinds of industry?

Put simply, graphic storytellers can create sequences of illustrations that can combine with the written word to tell complex human stories.

Some graphic storytellers choose to tell stories about cartoon animals or superheroes, while others choose to tell stories about historical figures, or the experiences of their friends. Still others make work that feels more like conceptual art than a short story or a novel, using abstraction or other experimental styles.

Whatever they do, these artists are all fluent in an intricate visual language that can shift between modes such as prose, dialogue, cinematic language, flowcharts, cartography and diagrams.

Learning to communicate using this language takes years of practice and skills development, and those who master it are rare.

This particular skillset has developed over time and has responded to commercial contexts as well as community practices.

Comics and cartooning have always had a place in industries other than the comics community itself. They've long been associated with the commercial art and advertising industries. In a pre-digital media landscape, graphic storytellers were often employed as 'decorators' or 'illustrators' creating public-facing imagery for advertising, news or editorial content. The graphic storyteller's job was to facilitate the transfer of ideas from an organisation to a broad 'reading public'.

This traditional work privileged the kinds of self-evident craft-based skills that you

can most easily see on a comics page: drawing, lettering, colouring. Often graphic storytellers were teamed up with other creatives who took on the big-picture creative thinking. This is perhaps typified by the relationship between a copywriter at an advertising agency and the commercial artists working under them. This 'commercial art' role has long been performed by graphic storytellers, who were deemed indispensable as craftspeople.

Many of our survey participants said that this kind of work is an important component of their practice. They find work in advertising, advocacy, art direction or public communication. The key skills a graphic storyteller deploys in this kind of work are drawing, illustration and digital graphics.

But this is a changing landscape. New opportunities are also being taken up by our survey participants, and these are more likely to involve internal communications, storytelling, mapping, strategic thinking and visual problem-solving. Graphic storytellers used to be employed to help organisations communicate externally with the public but now they are also being used to assist organisations, teams, and individuals to communicate internally with each other.

In these new areas of industry, the skills demanded of graphic storytellers are more likely to be people skills. Because these people skills – or interpersonal skills – activate different parts of the graphic storyteller's technical expertise, they are often unique and specific to the graphic storyteller.





Skills in a cross-industry setting

This study asked graphic storytellers to list their skills and rank them in order of usefulness when working in industries outside the arts.

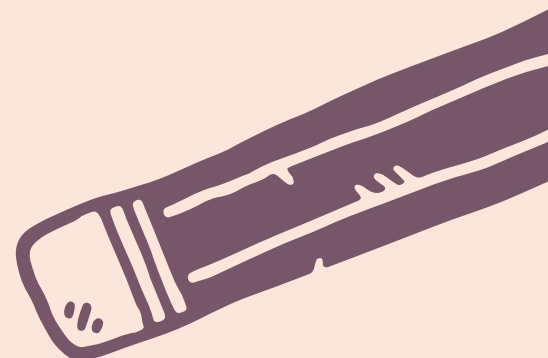
The skills most commonly cited were illustration (cited by 56% of participants), sketching ideas (42%) and the use of digital software and equipment (34%). Further behind were editing and proofreading (20%) and the making of comics themselves (18%).

But when we asked them to describe a specific situation where they felt their skills were useful in an industry outside the arts, the responses told a different story.

At face value, graphic storytellers were being employed to produce a crafted deliverable that made use of their technical skills, for example, a set of illustrations or a poster.

But when they described the working situation in detail, participants often described a more complex interaction in which their interpersonal and collaborative skills were activated.

Layout design that I learnt in my creative practice has been used countless times in my health work as a community based nurse. Resulting in a better and more concise pamphlet.



I used my graphic design and illustration analysis/communication/problem-solving skills to help a not-for-profit organisation develop its strategic plan.

Then put together the plan taking into account the information hierarchy, the intended audience and the tone that the document needs to have to clearly communicate the information.

Listening to the board and helping everyone to gain an idea of the different perspectives through mind maps and data visualisation.

Then working out how we can marry the ideas of the group with the technical requirements of the document.



I have been commissioned by federal government departments such as Geoscience Australia and the Royal Australian Navy to illustrate comics that explain aspects of their organisation's strategy.

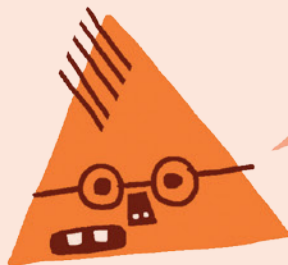
These comics/illustrations were used to communicate the information to staff of the organisation (e.g. sailors of the Navy), or to people who the organisation works with (e.g. people who live in areas of Papua New Guinea that are prone to natural hazards like earthquakes and tsunami).

These examples show how organisations used comics/illustrations as a tool to make their communication messages more understandable.



I was a social media officer for a major union. Facebook posts that were successful depended heavily on fast communication of complex ideas using visual communication and humour.

Viewers needed to see the post and immediately 'get it' - visual exaggeration, sight-based gags and minimal use of text were a massive part of that.



I have transitioned from a freelance illustration career to a career as a senior consultant in the tech industry, using my creative skills to design new products, ways of working, commercial and cultural strategies.

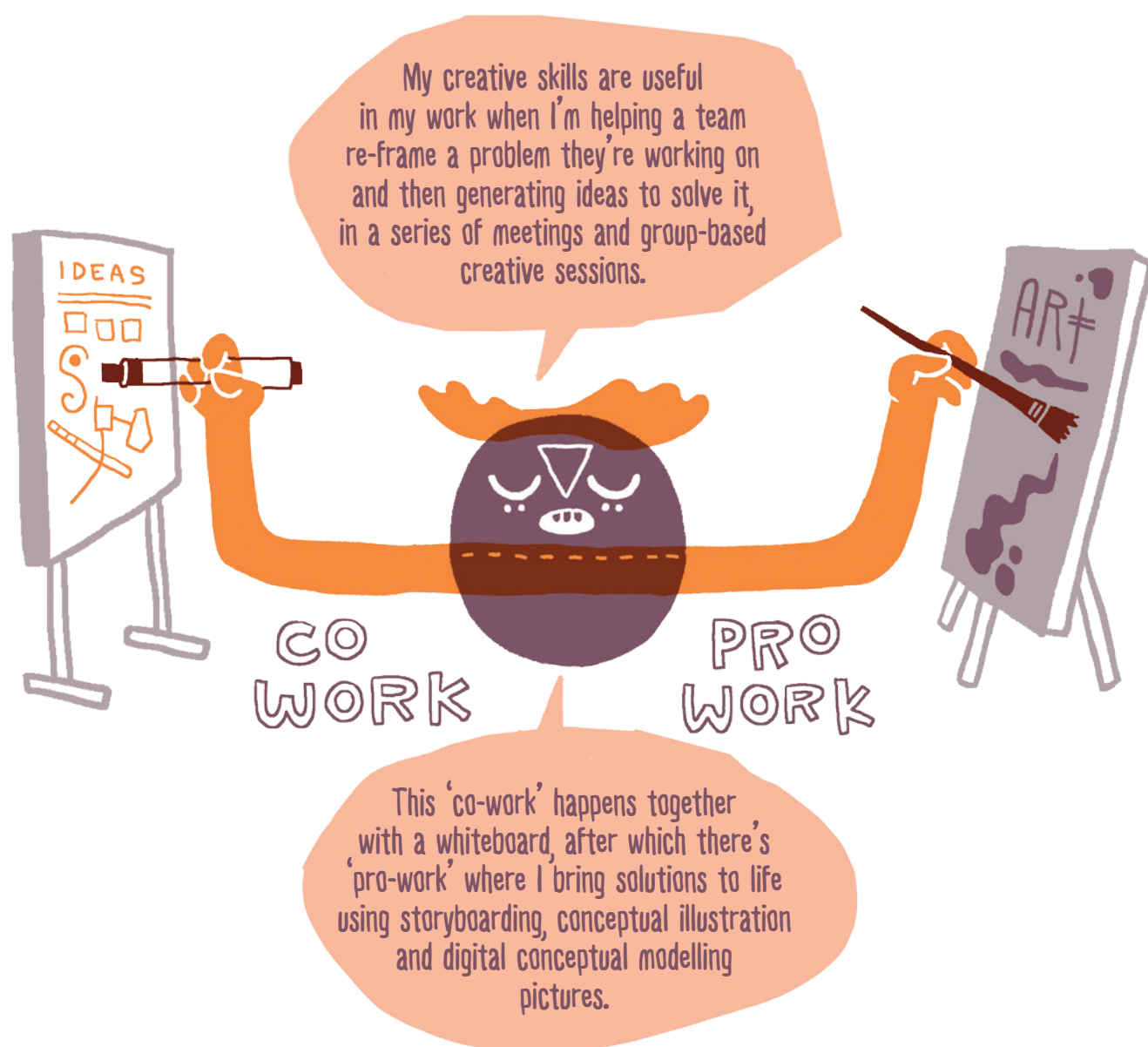
It's a combination of all of my creative skills that enables me to work in this space.



A combination of skills

Perhaps because there is no job description for a 'graphic storyteller', the exact way the graphic storyteller uses their skills often depends on a particular relationship with an employer. Our narrative case studies show some of these relationships in action (see pages 48-53).

In many cases, this is about a specific blend of the technical skills that we traditionally associate with comics-making, and the interpersonal skills that make them uniquely useful in a range of non-arts industries.



Technical skills

Many artists described the technical skills and craft-based mastery they learned in comics becoming useful in offices and other non-creative settings.

Examples of these technical skills include fine drafts-personship, digital image manipulation, lettering, technical drawing, mastery of traditional materials, copyediting and proofreading, print production and web design.

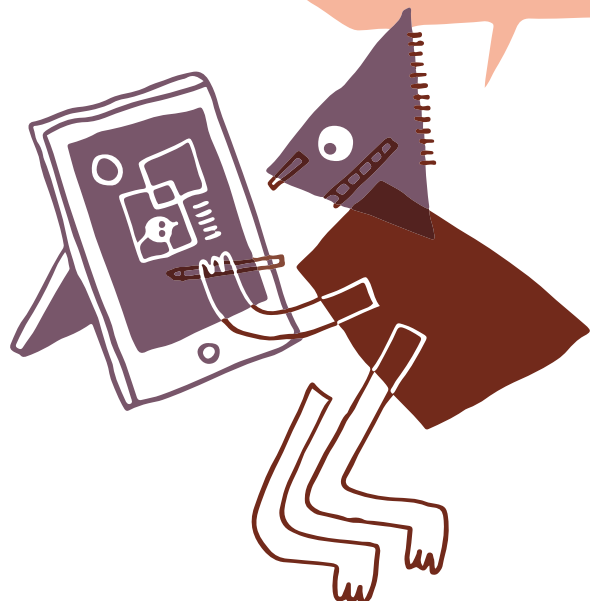
'I learned everything I know about printing from comics work. I am able to find specialist printers and communicate what we need when nobody else has the confidence/language for it.'



Simple knowledge of image editing software is in demand as a skill for all sorts of jobs these days.

I was recently interviewed for a retail admin job where they were interested in me because they also needed help with basic content creation for their website and social media.

'To make my webcomic I had to learn how to work with code and that experience led me to a non-creative day job where I run a web development company.'



Interpretive skills

When we asked artists to reflect on situations where their skills were useful, another theme emerged. Often, it was not just the delivery of fine illustration, posters or web content that was seen as useful, but the ability to combine or activate these in a more complex workplace setting, in response to the needs of the workplace. Examples of these kinds of skills include storytelling, sketching concepts, generating visual metaphors, active listening, iterating visual language, strategic thinking, and visual problem solving.



The major skill is listening to people talking and then drawing pictures of what they are thinking (which is very often different to what they are saying.)



I work in an industry that produces reports for government departments. Sometimes these reports require infographics, diagrams or flowcharts.

I have been able to develop or improve these illustrations to help convey information more meaningfully by applying the visual literacy I learned through creating comics.



As important as those technical skills are there's an emerging field of much more free-flowing conceptual visual communication that more and more businesses and roles are appreciating.



This sort of drawing happens on whiteboards, and is often rubbed out and lost after it's had its impact in a meeting, but is nonetheless powerful.



Skill styles combined

Most graphic storytellers have a different mix of these skills.

Graphic storytellers develop their specific mix because their art form is, on the one hand, a practical craft that requires many, many hours of intricate technical labour; and, on the other hand, a fluid literary language that requires research, strategic planning, brainstorming, iteration and feedback.

One set of skills can be activated and enriched by social interaction, an exchange of ideas and language. The other is often strictly hermetic,¹⁴ an interaction between the artist and the page.

TECHNICAL SKILLS

Craft-based – Technical – Procedural

Typical technical skills

Fine draftspersonship – Digital image manipulation – Lettering – Technical drawing – Mastery of traditional materials – Copyediting and proofreading – Print production – Web design.

Technical skills are usually at play when graphic storytellers are alone in their studios making illustrations or intricate drawings.

Technical skills are most powerful in the workplace when graphic storytellers have been clearly briefed.

Clients like technical skills because they need beautiful images to present their messages.

The value of technical skills is self-evident to clients because the focus is on a crafted deliverable.

Technical skills tend to be useful at the end of a project when artists are required to create finished art with a high level of polish.

Technical skills are public facing.

A graphic storyteller's skills are employed to make work that is intended to be presented to the general public.

INTERPRETIVE SKILLS

Social – Critical – Intuitive

Typical interpretive skills

Storytelling – Sketching concepts – Generating visual metaphors – Active listening – Iterating visual language – Strategic thinking – Visual problem solving.

Interpretive skills are usually at play when artists are engaging with ideas and research and working to find new visual language.

Interpretive skills are powerful in the workplace when graphic storytellers are in groups with other people trying to solve a problem.

Clients like interpretive skills because they need new visual language and visual metaphor to help understand what they are doing and to communicate this with each other.

The value of interpretive skills is harder to see. Clients may not always understand why they need someone who can draw when they are making decisions or solving problems. It often requires the artist to recognise the value of their expertise and make the case for it.

Interpretive skills tend to be useful at the beginning of a project, for example in research groups, strategy meetings and brainstorming sessions. Often these skills help stakeholders in a project better understand what it is they are doing.

Interpersonal skills are inward facing.

This kind of work is usually not for the general public to see. It is deployed as part of the process rather than the outcome of a project.

¹⁴ Unaffected by external influences.

Linking employers and clients with graphic storytellers

The complexity of graphic storytelling skills – and the way they interact – is a large part of their value. It's also a factor that makes them challenging to formulate.

Even when an employer knows intuitively that they require this skillset, they may find it challenging to name and articulate. They may not know this skillset often comes from comics.

So how do employers end up sourcing the graphic storyteller's skillset?

A recurring story from our case studies was that graphic storytellers were often approached at first for their technical skills.

But the working relationship really became productive when the clients recognised the value of the artist's interpretive skills.

Both technical and interpretive skills are equally valuable in workplace settings, but the true value of the graphic storyteller in the workplace is the ability to shift fluidly between these kinds of thinking and doing.



'The Secret Club' – Higher income earners and their skills

As mentioned in the statistics on graphic storytellers' income sources on page 16, a small group of 24 surveyed artists (9%) reported that they make more than \$100,000 per year and do not have a day job or a side hustle that is not creative.

These artists are spending all their time using their creative skills and making a healthy living at it. What are these artists doing that other artists are not?

On a closer look we noticed that one of the hallmarks of these high-earning creative professionals is that they all work as freelancers or salaried staff in a cross-industry setting. The most common professional roles are in graphic

recording, user experience design, education and corporate communications.

When these high earners describe themselves and their roles, it is clear that they require intensive use of both technical and interpretive skills. For these artists, the ability to move quickly between doing and thinking is critical, providing access to new workplaces and emerging industries.

The graphic storyteller's contribution to industry

The combination of technical and interpretive skills is a large part of the graphic storyteller's value, and in this section we outline some of the key ways graphic storytellers contribute to industry.

These insights are drawn from both qualitative and quantitative responses in the survey.



Comics gave me the ability to think in pictures to translate complex business ideas and messages into a simple cartoon illustration.

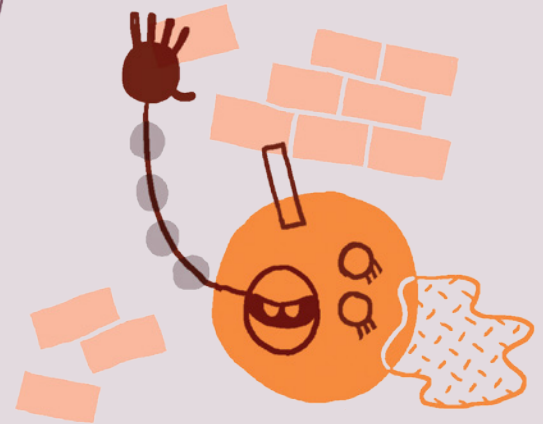


I am an engineer and data scientist in my day job. Finding good ways to visualise designs or data so that they are comprehensible to both technical and non-technical audiences is invaluable.



Being observant and critical is a massive part of my job. My creative practice as a comics artist is directly responsible for my development of these skills and personal attributes.

I work in architecture and my job draws on a lot of qualities and skills etc like: imagination, drawing, creativity within restraints, communication, seeing the individual piece in the greater whole.



Graphic storytellers make complex messages easy to understand

24% of survey participants described a situation where they found it easy to visualise an idea that was complicated for others to understand. 67% percent of those artists said that they had developed this ability through their creative practice.

Graphic storytellers described their ability to draw simply, clearly and quickly as an incredibly useful communication tool. They often see their role as intermediaries between people in different fields with different approaches to problems and situations.

Many artists described a scene in which a graphic storyteller became unexpectedly useful 'in the room' where strategic planning or brainstorming was happening. They described how they could work a kind of 'magic' through live drawing while abstract, complicated or formless discussions were unfolding.

'I work in science communication, but in an environment where there aren't many visual aids. I have been able to introduce visual representations of complex processes and ideas into the practice (comics/flow charts/animations/posters), to improve reach and increase relevance of the science.'



'I use visual narrative in slide decks all the time in my IT job to help people understand complex things and processes in whatever we are working on. Understanding the narrative structure is something I've picked up from my own personal creative work. The result is that we get much better shared understandings between the team and the rest of the business.'



I work in an industry that produces reports for government departments.

Sometimes these reports require infographics, diagrams or flowcharts. I have been able to develop or improve these illustrations to help convey information more meaningfully by applying the visual literacy I learned through creating comics.



In my day job working at a union, the skills I've developed through cartooning come in handy every single day.

One example is a comic I wrote and made for the union to assist our members in understanding a complex legal term that they needed to know in order to avoid having that clause forced into their EBA. It was relatively easy to come up with a visual metaphor and to then flesh this out in a comic.

Being able to convey information and think visually is incredibly useful when doing projects at the union about making complex information more broadly accessible.



Graphic storytellers

work with visual metaphors

Survey participants cited their ability to reframe information using visual metaphor as a powerful skill in a cross-industry setting.

Making comics helps graphic storytellers develop the ability to create and apply nuanced visual metaphors through drawing. Visual metaphors are enormously valuable in organisational communications because they are efficient framing devices for big ideas or key messages. The right visual metaphor can help people communicate a nuanced emotional reality, make sense of a confusing data point, describe a complicated cause-and-effect relationship, or depict a multi-faceted process.

Graphic storytellers are empathic

10% of survey participants said their creative practice has led them to develop skills in listening and observation.

Others described the value of their ability to draw humans interacting with each other in narrative form. Graphic storytellers are attentive to body language and facial cues and have an ability to present nuanced emotional moments in a few lines. This has also prepared them for what we might call 'empathy work' such as situations where active listening and reflection is important.

Participants described how clients appreciate their hand-made drawings as 'friendly' or 'humble', helping to add a human touch, particularly when communicating a complicated system, abstract concept or precise description of an emotional reality.

I worked with a couple of social workers for STARTTS, teaching comics to survivors of torture and trauma.

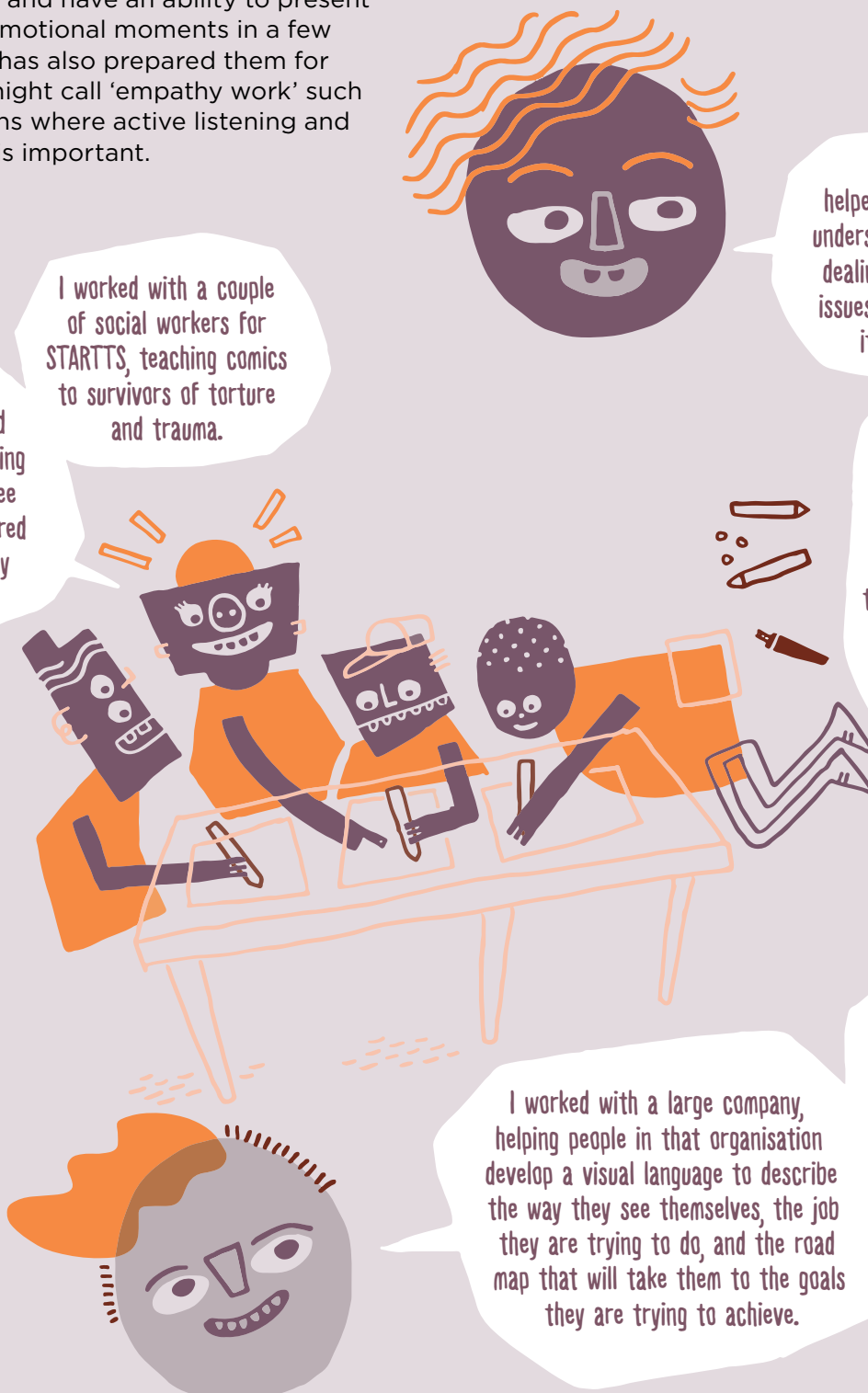
The course was aimed at improving the wellbeing of children from refugee families and was measured in terms determined by the social workers.

In one project I helped a company build an understanding of how it was dealing with mental health issues in its customers and its own employees.

I helped the company tell ten true stories, each drawn as comics. These were released widely throughout the organisation and the company continues to use the pieces formally and informally. Managers print them out and discuss them with their teams.

The major skill is listening to people talking and then drawing pictures of what they are thinking (which is very often different to what they are saying).

I worked with a large company, helping people in that organisation develop a visual language to describe the way they see themselves, the job they are trying to do, and the road map that will take them to the goals they are trying to achieve.



Graphic storytellers can help us understand health, wellbeing and bodies

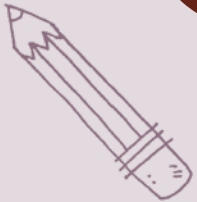
15% of participants described using their skills to help people and organisations communicate in health contexts, such as public health, rehabilitation or in organisational health and safety.

Graphic storytellers have the ability to help people understand how complicated medical ideas are connected with the routines and embodied experiences of daily life.

When artists develop empathy skills and attention to fine details, they can also depict personal routines and embodied sensations (like pain) in a way that is meaningful to both ordinary individuals and experts.



'My illustrations are utilised in surgery education.'



'I did a web comic about doctor-patient communication for the health sector.'



'Once, I created a series of illustrations: facial expressions (about 20-30) depicting happy, sad, angry etc. For use during a psychological therapy session.'

'I have made comic art that provides health and safety information for Aboriginal women in custody.'



Graphic storytellers are educators

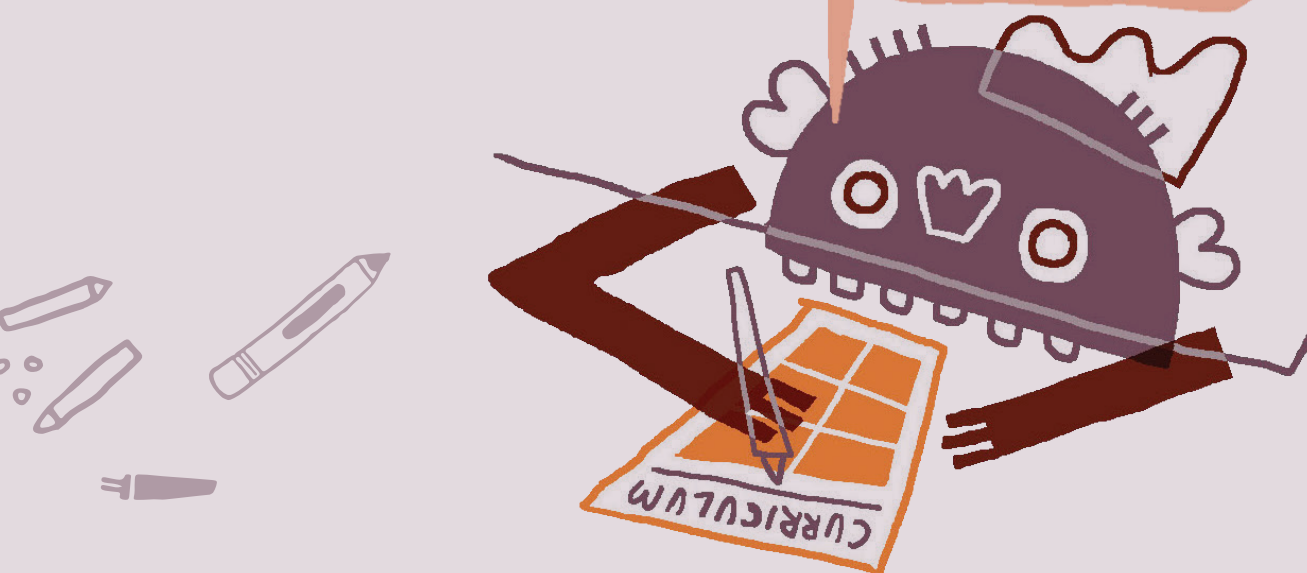
28% of participants described a situation where their skills became useful in an educational setting, from internal training within organisations to public-facing education programs. 27% of participants cited workshop facilitation in the top three sources of income from their creative practice.

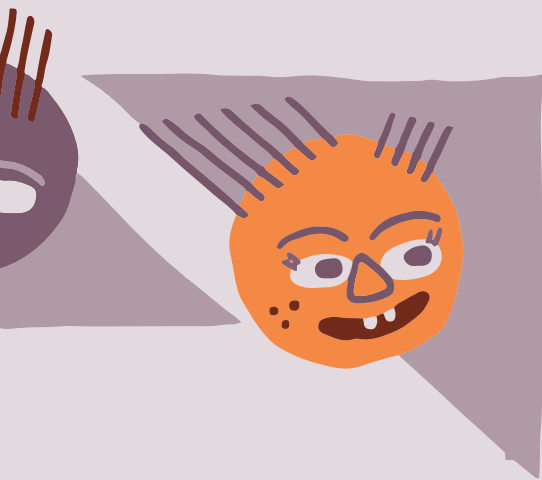
Graphic storytellers often find themselves designing relatable resources that help people learn and understand at all stages of life, from early childhood through to old age.

'I was commissioned to develop a visual comic style brochure to help educate young people or people who speak English as a second language about South Australian history.'

I work as a pedagogy teacher (I help teachers teach better) at a university. I use my creative skills in that job often.

For example, I often design and illustrate 'cheatsheets' for trainings and workshop, or I write and draw small comics to help explain a section of a curriculum.





'Visual narrative skills are very very useful in schools, especially as schools transition to future focussed learning spaces where the overarching educational priorities all relate to our skillset!'

I work in education as a primary classroom teacher.

I use my creative skills, particularly drawing, constantly in class and while being able to draw is very entertaining for the kids, it is the skills that come with drawing that have been of particular use to the children such as visual notetaking, storyboarding and visualising ideas and phenomena via diagrams in STEM subjects.



Graphic storytellers are conceptual thinkers

To make a comic, a graphic storyteller has to conceive of hypothetical human experiences, and work out how to narrate them from panel to panel and scene to scene.

When this skill is transferred to other industries, it can become indispensable as part of the design of new products and services, particularly services that may exist in a future that hasn't happened yet, or services that require complicated user interaction.

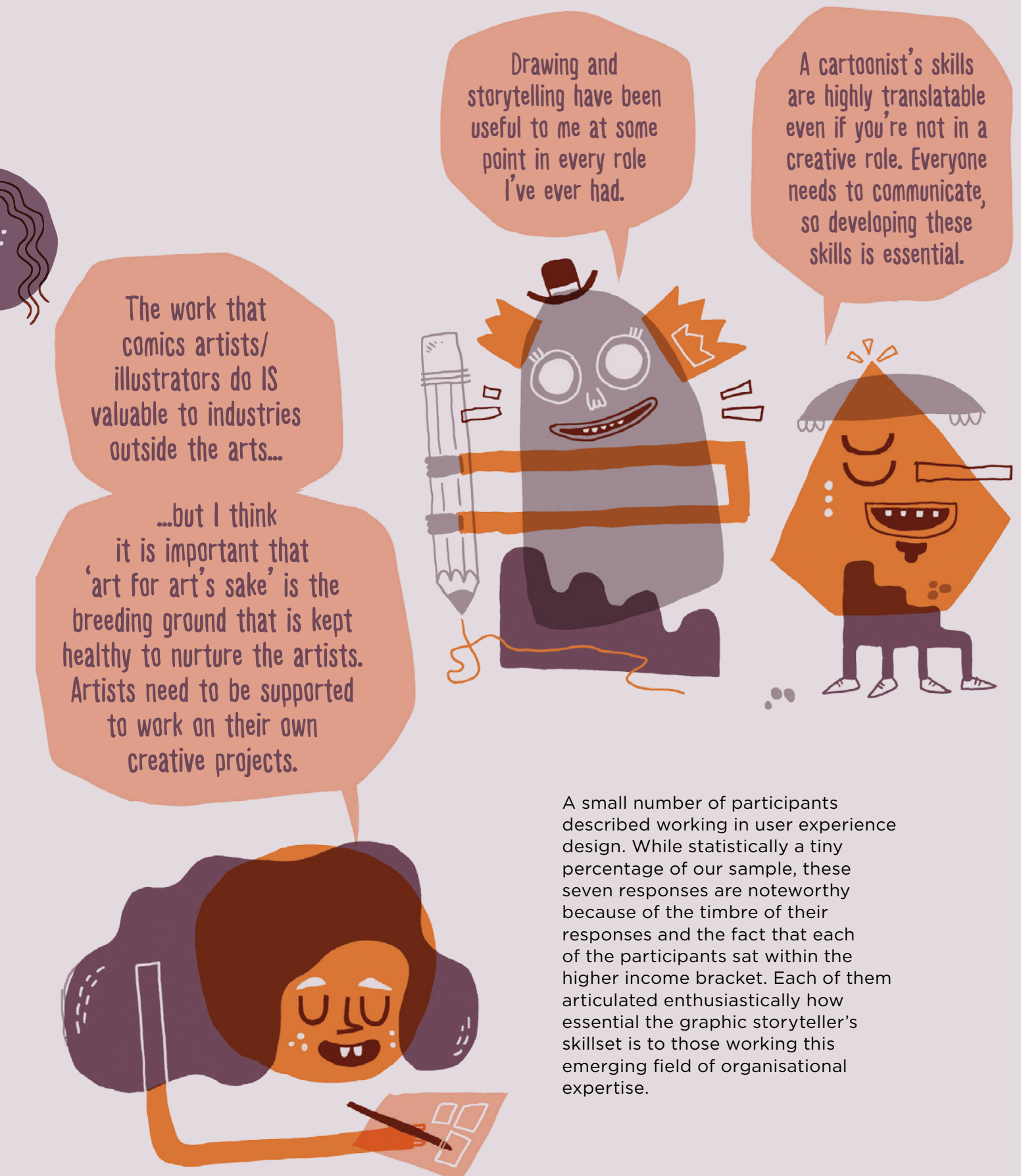


Use of visual narrative is an integral part of 'human-centred design' work. I've been employing skills accrued through work in comics on many product/service/system design projects. It's useful in mapping customer journeys, prototyping solutions and generally synthesizing information into visual artefacts.

I use skills that I developed from making comics in my work designing Museum galleries and mapping visitor experiences within those spaces.

I use visual narrative to help conceptualise how interviews and pitch meetings will go. I create hypothetical stories that turn out to be pretty close to the real thing. It's the same kind of skill that I apply when I am drawing fictional conversations in my comics.





Drawing and storytelling have been useful to me at some point in every role I've ever had.

A cartoonist's skills are highly translatable even if you're not in a creative role. Everyone needs to communicate, so developing these skills is essential.

The work that comics artists/illustrators do IS valuable to industries outside the arts...

...but I think it is important that 'art for art's sake' is the breeding ground that is kept healthy to nurture the artists. Artists need to be supported to work on their own creative projects.

A small number of participants described working in user experience design. While statistically a tiny percentage of our sample, these seven responses are noteworthy because of the timbre of their responses and the fact that each of the participants sat within the higher income bracket. Each of them articulated enthusiastically how essential the graphic storyteller's skillset is to those working this emerging field of organisational expertise.

Case studies – the graphic storyteller’s skillset at work

CASE STUDY ONE: THE LEGAL SECTOR

In which an underground cartoonist helps create contracts for a law firm.

Loui has been making comics since the 1980s when he made edgy stories for a motorcycle magazine. After illustrating children’s books for many years, the work dried up and he began helping friends in the corporate world to illustrate their presentations. This led to a range of graphic recording and information design jobs, and now Loui works full-time helping businesses and organisations develop new visual language.

Meanwhile, **Camilla** is a pioneer in the legal space. She’s helping to develop a new kind of legal contract that utilises the language of comics. Her goal is to help ordinary people get a better understanding of the contracts that they sign by replacing ‘legalese’ with carefully crafted comics.

As a contracts lawyer, the traditional problem that Camilla has to solve is how to accurately describe a relationship or a transaction between two parties. As a graphic lawyer, however, her problem is how to do that in a way that is more accessible than in the standard contract. Camilla is not an artist, so she often needs to employ someone like Loui with a graphic storyteller’s skillset to

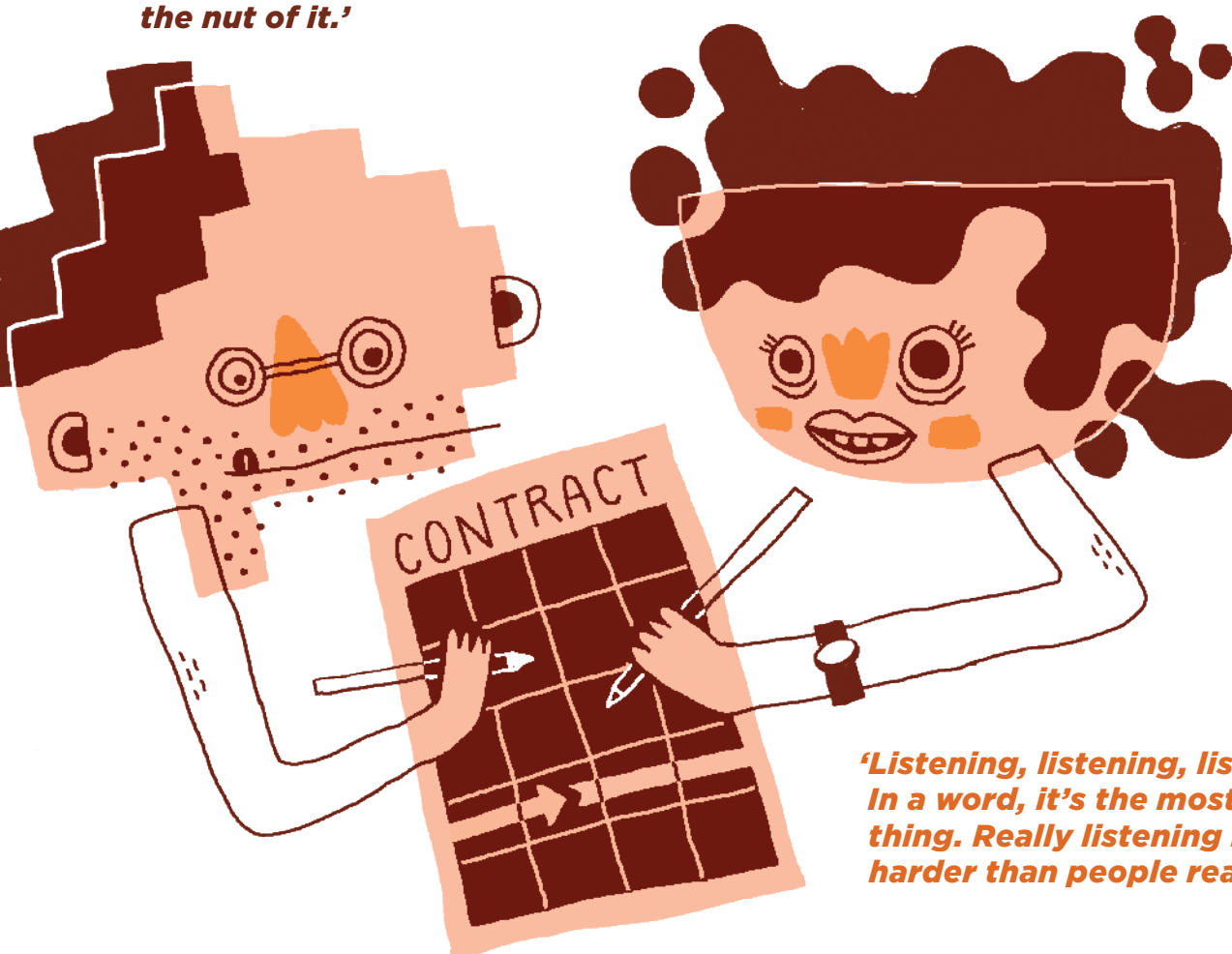
help translate a complicated set of legal statements into a comic.

At the beginning of Loui and Camilla’s working relationship, Camilla imagined that the legal team would think up images and would then tell Loui what to draw. But in practice she found that Loui contributed much more to the translation. He wasn’t just the hired pencil that they thought they were getting.

Loui sat in on a meeting during which Camilla and her colleagues were arguing about how to illustrate a certain concept. At one point, Loui grabbed a napkin and drew the solution to the problem: a way of illustrating the concept that Camilla and the legal team would have never arrived at on their own. In this instance Loui quickly produced two visual metaphors and nested them together in a single cartoon to communicate a complicated relationship between two parties.

As the relationship developed and Camilla and Loui worked on more and more contract projects, Loui became a true collaborator in the translation process. Loui and Camilla both identify listening as the key skill that Loui is able to bring

'I've developed the skill of listening carefully to what someone is saying and making drawings that get to the nut of it.'



'Listening, listening, listening. In a word, it's the most important thing. Really listening is a lot harder than people realise.'

to complex ensemble discussions. Loui said, *'I've developed the skill of listening carefully to what someone is saying and making drawings that get to the nut of it.'* And Camilla echoed, *'Listening, listening, listening. In a word, it's the most important thing. Really listening is a lot harder than people realise.'*

Loui has honed the skill of synthesising complexity into simple combinations of lines and words. The team did much of their most crucial work 'in the room' together brainstorming and visualising different approaches to the legal language problems in front of them. Loui's job was often to create visual metaphors and weave them together to articulate a legal concept, and Camilla's job was to apply her legal rigour to the new language to ensure that it was as precise and unambiguous as possible.

So what are the skills that Camilla thinks make a good graphic contract? She is looking for more than just the ability to make nice illustrations: *'I think there are some magnificent visual thinkers out there who can't draw, and then there are some amazing, talented artists who are not very good at visual thinking. It's very rare to find someone that can do both.'* Ultimately what Camilla needs is someone who can draw and also has empathic sensibilities of a storyteller, someone who can put themselves in someone else's shoes and try to anticipate what they will understand when they see something.

Graphic contracts are a new legal innovation, still mainly used by legal researchers, but Camilla and her colleagues are certain that the contracts work. This is a field with huge growth potential and a possible source of new opportunities for those with the graphic storyteller's skillset.

CASE STUDY TWO: THE MENTAL HEALTH SECTOR

In which a writer and a comic artist help create a bridge between youth mental health workers and their clients

Marc has been making comics independently for many years, either self-publishing them or releasing them for publication in literary journals like *Overland*, *Going Down Swinging* and *The Lifted Brow*. In 2014 Marc founded Advicecomics, a cartoon advice column where readers can write in and ask for help from a range of cartoon columnists and receive their answers in comic form. Advicecomics modelled a way to discuss mental health that was accessible and popular.

Penni is a novelist, Ph.D. candidate, and creative writing teacher. Together, Penni and Marc are a graphic storytelling team who work collaboratively to create comics that creatively convey therapies and mental health concepts to young people.

Mario works for an organisation that provides specialist mental health services for people aged 15–25. Part of Mario’s job is to create online content that works as a kind of social therapy for young people. He employed Penni and Marc to help him develop the content.

This working relationship began when Mario had a problem that he needed to solve. His team, made up of psychologists, information technology specialists, and researchers, had created online content for young people that would help them better understand their mental health and develop strategies to help them maintain a good quality of life. The online content was text-based, with the occasional use of stick-figure drawings as ‘talking heads’. It was online and available to young clients. The problem was that the young people weren’t reading it.



After running focus groups, Mario identified the problems with the content. It was *'Too text-heavy, too cognitively demanding. It wasn't engaging. It wasn't appealing. They didn't see it as being relevant to their lives.'* Mario found that young people rarely looked at the therapeutic online content more than once and they often didn't remember it, even when the team branched out into other media such as audio or short animations. On Penni's recommendation of Advicecomics, Mario decided to introduce storytelling, graphic design and comics to see if they could be a solution to the problem.

The team began a new series of content by designing characters. In collaboration with the clinical staff, Marc developed four characters that would be recurring figures in a series of comics. Meanwhile Penni took the complex psychological concepts and therapeutic procedures and rewrote them into narratives with accessible language. Marc then created thumbnail drafts of the stories in comics form, which were tested with a focus group of young people. With their feedback, the comics were redrafted, Marc completed the finished art, and the result was uploaded into the system as content for users.

The process had some teething problems. At first the creative team felt like they were being pulled in two different directions. On the one hand they had to serve the young people who clearly wanted the stories to be accessible, funny, edgy and relatable. On the other hand, the clinical staff had their own set of concerns: they needed the content to be rigorously and scientifically evidence-based, and they needed to prove to their funding bodies that the therapy worked.

Marc, like many great alternative cartoonists, has an ability to depict everyday life honestly in all its fine details. At first, his drawing style was met with resistance from the clinical team: *'They were worried about the way I drew characters with dirty fingernails and slumped shoulders. They were worried that it was stigmatising and they thought it might be better to present cleaner, sort of aspirational characters to the young people. So in our first comics we developed a style that was kind of sanitised.'*

On reflection the team realised that while their goals were the same, there was a tension between the core values and working methods of the clinical staff and the creative team. Mario said: *'You get a psychologist, and they fixate on the evidence-based idea and on the other hand you have the creative team and they fixate on the readers' experience: "Does this make sense?", "Is it coherent?", "Is it appealing?" It can be stressful but I could tell that the motivations of the two parts of the team were so pure.'*

In this instance the graphic storytellers did much more than act as technicians working to execute the clinical team's plans. The creative team brought new values and new sensibilities into the collaboration along with their visual language skills.

The way the creative team simplified clinical concepts, and synthesised them into funny and memorable visual metaphors, allowed the therapeutic resources to be more impactful. Penni and Marc also brought a playful and honest tone to the material that helped with engagement. This ability to control and maintain a nuanced tone in a narrative, even a technical document or a story about highly sensitive material such as mental illness, is one of the graphic storyteller's key skills.

One thing that Marc and Penni realised is that the key to success was not to think about the work in terms of checking off tasks or delivering items to a brief. Instead the real value was created through the development of a working relationship with the clinical and research staff. The key ingredient here was time: to identify and discuss divergent interdisciplinary values, to test concepts on young clients, and to make progress with a sense of trust that each part of the collaborative team, including artists, could contribute significant expertise.

Marc is still making comics with the organisation. Mario says, *'The young people are looking forward to them. They want more of them. It's remarkable.'*

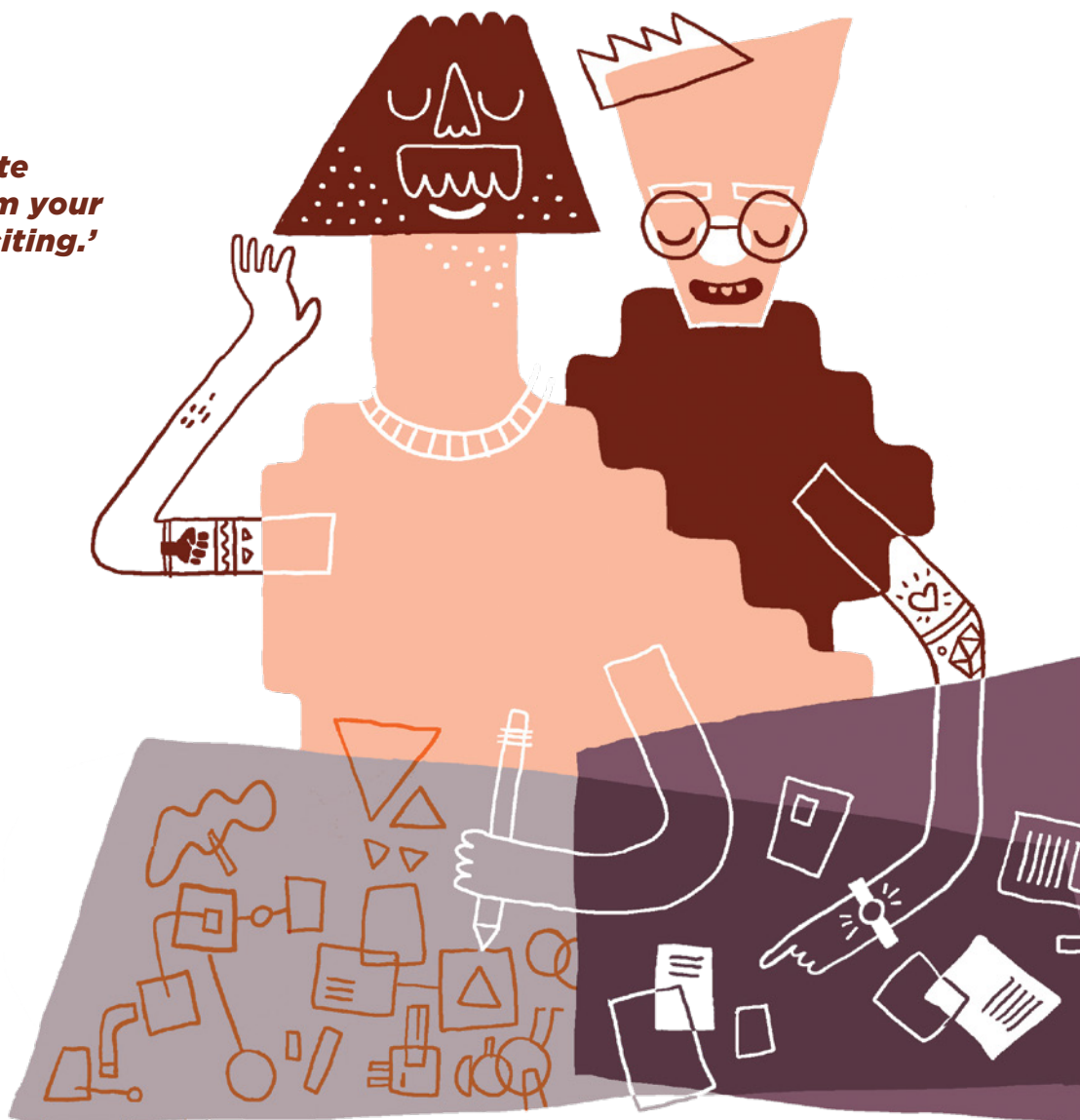
CASE STUDY THREE: THE UNION SECTOR

In which a graphic journalist brings specialist knowledge, research skills and creative intuition to help a union activate its membership.

Sam is a graphic storyteller who makes longform comics journalism, often about Australian work practices, human rights, and land use. He was a natural fit for **Amedeo**, a campaign and communications manager for a transport union. Amedeo was looking for fresh ways to tell the history of the union and activate its membership.

Amedeo identified a problem with the typical way the union went about raising awareness and garnering new members. He said, *'We can't just recycle stock images and write news articles because that's what we've been doing for forever and a day.'* Amedeo approached Sam to help him solve this problem.

'It was the very opposite of being alienated from your labour. It was very exciting.'



Sam is an activist and union campaigner in his own right, with specialist knowledge of union values, as well as a deep understanding of union graphics. This is a great example of how partnerships between graphic storytellers and their employers happen – although Sam is quick to point out that he doesn't really have 'employers'. Amedeo is a client who gives him repeated work, and Sam lacks employment stability in general.

While Sam has challenges finding stable work, Amedeo faces his own challenges hiring graphic storytellers, since his job is to represent a membership and not all members understand why comics creation is a justified expense. One process in particular requires translation to this member base. Sam makes thumbnails (rough comics) before producing final work to check that clients are happy with tone, pace, and details. To a membership unfamiliar with comics, this can look like rushed, unsuitable work, even though it's a regular part of the process between illustrators and clients. Helping his clients understand that the draft is a living document and that their insights and feedback can help shape the sequence of images ends up being a big part of the job.

When a client decides to hire Sam, his specialist knowledge is powerful. He makes sure it's current and relevant through taking part in a collaborative research process with his clients. Even though he is a freelancer or a gig worker, Sam feels a great sense of agency over the work he is doing. He said: *'It was the very opposite of being alienated from your labour. It was very exciting.'*

Like many industries, unions find it hard to tell their complex histories in ways that inspire new memberships to action. Sometimes graphic storytelling is about making complex ideas simple, but Sam and Amedeo wanted to find a way to tell a story clearly and accurately that would also challenge readers and make them engage and think. As Sam puts it, *'this is kind of the cool thing about cartoons: the activeness of the medium. There's a lot of machinery that's invisible behind the googly eyes.'*

Sam can dig deep into a story to identify the spirit of an issue and use that to deliver a message. Sam and Amedeo decided to tell the story of a time when a persecuted union fought back, in order to inspire and activate new members. They used narrative techniques and an intuitive visual synthesis to tell a powerful historical story. In doing so, Sam and Amedeo helped all the stakeholders, even the people running the union, understand what they were doing and why they were doing it in a new light. It's hard work, but it's energising and it's effective.

'This is kind of the cool thing about cartoons: the activeness of the medium. There's a lot of machinery that's invisible behind the googly eyes.'

