Weaving comics pedagogy into a multi-level creative writing program
AWP 2024
Pre-recorded panel with Sarah Leavitt, Taylor Brown-Evans, Emily Chou and Eve Salomons.

SUMMARY

Bios

Sarah Leavitt (panel organizer) is the author of three book-length comics: Tangles: A Story About Alzheimer’s, My Mother, and Me (in production as a feature animation); Agnes, Murderess; and Something, Not Nothing (forthcoming fall 2024). She has developed and taught comics classes since 2012 at the UBC School of Creative Writing.

Taylor Brown-Evans is a full-time lecturer at the School of Creative Writing. He is a writer, illustrator and cartoonist living in Vancouver. His work has appeared in Geist, Matrix, Poetry is Dead, The Feathertale Review, and Ricepaper Magazine. His 2017 project, Songs for a Lost Pod, is a comic book collaboration with musician Leah Abrahamson about a pod of Orca whales.

Emily Chou is a graduate of our MFA program. She’s a writer-cartoonist from the ancestral and unceded lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Sḵwx̱wú7mesh, and salilwətaɬ Nations. She has lived in the UK, Japan, and Italy. Her work has appeared in several journals and anthologies.

Eve Salomons is a graduate of our BFA program. They live and make comics in Vancouver, mostly about their own life and sometimes about other people’s, and have had comics published in Snapline, a publication of The Society of Northern Alberta Print-artists.

Introduction (Sarah)

I organized this panel because our school is quite unique in the breadth and depth of the comics classes we offer as part of a creative writing program, and I wanted to share our experience with others who might be thinking about how to add comics classes to their own programs. Taylor and I have both been here for about ten years, and it feels like we’re always in the process of refining how and what we teach. Inevitably, our students are collaborators in that development process, which is why I included two alumni on the panel – Emily and Eve.

The UBC School of Creative Writing is large and multi-genre. We offer classes in fiction, creative non-fiction, poetry, writing for film and TV, playwrighting, writing for video games, new media, lyric forms or song writing, comedy writing and, of course, graphic forms or comics.

We have large lecture classes at the 200 and 300 levels in almost all these forms, including comics. These classes are open to students throughout the university, so the students come from science, business, arts, and so on. We offer intro comics classes in both our BFA and MFA, and starting last year we added second level courses that I’ll describe later. Every year we also have some other comics-related projects and events, including guest speakers, ad hoc
collaborations with other faculties on comics-based projects, and, this past summer, the inaugural Camp Comics, a one-day event open to all our students and alumni.

Teaching the 200 and 300 level courses (Taylor)

One of the draws of UBC’s School of Creative Writing is the breadth of forms and genres we offer. Our introduction-level classes are often popular electives for students in more analytic faculties who might be looking to stretch their creative muscles or to try out some of our varied forms, or even just get a break from math and science. As a result, some of our introduction classes can get quite large, ranging from 250 to upwards of 500 students. Our classes on comics are particularly popular, and demand continues to grow. While it’s exciting to see so much enthusiasm, there are some challenges to teaching such large groups, especially when considering how self-directed and personal making comics can be. Together, Sarah and I have worked to build our comics classes with these challenges in mind, and have found solutions that not only offer students the ability to work at their own pace, but also personalize that learning, build a classroom community, build a personal comic making practice, and allow them to discover their own individual style and voice in the chorus.

Teaching the BFA and MFA courses (Sarah)

I started this position in 2021, after 9 years as an adjunct and lecturer, and I am 99% positive it’s the only tenure track comics-focused job in a Canadian (and possibly American) creative writing program. I think this indicates the importance our school places on comics. I’ve taught at the 200 and 300 level, but for the past few years I’ve been teaching the BFA and MFA workshops. Most of these students are new to comics. In both the BFA and MFA, I teach an introductory comics class, in which students complete a series of exercises and assignments leading to a final short comic. Last year was the first offering of a second-level comics class in the MFA, focused on book-length projects. This year will be the first offering of a second-level class for the BFA. I’m calling it Comics Experimentation and Exploration. The focus is on abstract comics, poetry comic, collage comics and other experimental forms.

Student experience (Emily)

The Creative Writing program wasn’t the only reason I applied to UBC, but it was definitely a pretty major factor. Not only that, it was the only program in Canada (in 2010) that offered such a large breadth of forms and opportunities. The comics classes were a truly unique experience and a way of connecting with likeminded people (many of whom I’m still friends with today)! Sarah’s class really encouraged me to think about comics more critically and gave me a larger vocabulary for it. Making comics with intentionality and getting to share these experiments and get feedback on them was incredibly valuable to a young writer like me. Making comics makes you a better writer, period. All the skills are applicable across multiple forms, and it’s an open door to a whole new way of thinking. People come into comics with zero experience and come away hooked. I returned to UBC to do my MFA in 2019 because it was one of the few grad programs where I would be able to submit a comic thesis. There were
lots of great opportunities, such as TA-ing or working at the school’s lit mag. There’s a very special atmosphere in comics classes where everyone is coming at it as a newbie. We’re all super encouraging while also really putting ourselves and our art out there and to be met with encouragement and enthusiasm is something I often miss now that I’ve graduated.

**Student experience (Eve)**

I applied to and enrolled at UBC in large part because of their Creative Writing program. I spent a lot of my youth doing art and comics in one way or another but started to take them more seriously in the 200- and 300-level classes taught by Sarah and Taylor. I eventually entered the BFA program and took comics classes there as well. I learned how to tell a story visually, how to tell one collaboratively, and that comics could be made about any topic I wanted, including the most mundane parts of my own life. I also fostered friendships and professional connections in those classes that I've maintained in the time since graduating. I've continued drawing and making comics, and am currently working on some long-form autobiographical work that began as a project in the BFA class.