Quick overview, and acknowledgement of Amanda Meek’s work
Exquisite corpse activity: have audience divide (can just shift in seats) into groups of three. Have paper already passed out/folded, extra pencils or pens as needed.

Instruct audience members to create a superhero.

- Starting with the top \( \frac{2}{3} \) of the page, draw the head/shoulders of your superhero.
- Be sure that your lines extend to the first crease! Try not to let your group members see your drawing, either.
- After 3 minutes, fold the top half down and trade pages with another group member.
- Draw the torso/upper body of your superhero, using the (visible) lines from the previous drawing as a guide.
- After 3 minutes, fold the page again, leaving only the bottom \( \frac{1}{3} \) of page.
- Switch with another group member.
- Draw the legs/lower body of your superhero.
Now, let’s evaluate. How many of you drew:

- A superhero with a conventionally attractive physique?
- Of another cultural or racial background?
- Aged more than 30 years?
- With visible disabilities?

Why do we default to certain stereotypical portrayals? Why do we reinforce or communicate bias in these ways, even if we are explicitly aware of the issues with doing so? How can we push back against that, or students to be reflective of their creative practices?
As Jenny and Sian discussed, this is all information literacy. Visual literacy is information literacy, and we can root it in critical, self-reflective practices that speak to the kinds of work/processes creators may be familiar with. By speaking of visual literacy, we can focus our discussions on reading, using, and creating images.

I wanted to address these kinds of questions with my students, primarily illustrators and sequential artists (cartoonists/comics artists), and one question in particular: how can students’ methods of visual research and development (character design) be informed, and possibly disrupted, by the inclusion of critical questioning and analysis?
This idea was partially borne out of a rare opportunity: as part of a larger comics forum at our institution, I was able to partner with a visiting artist, Brooke Allen, for a workshop with sequential art and illustration students. Allen’s work and character designs both embrace and subvert a variety of visual stereotypes, often in subtle ways.
This was someone the students could relate to in terms of work, and aspirations, but who could also speak to the vital issues of representation and its power.

“It goes a long way in helping feel like you belong in society when you can see someone from your community being a hero of a story [...] Seeing yourself accurately depicted in a story is vital to showing others that you belong, that you’re perfectly normal and aren’t something strange or other.”
(Also, if you ever want standing-room-only crowds at your library workshops, invite a cartoonist.)
But how do we teach to these issues of design and representation, especially when many elements of visual literacy are dependent on domain/subject knowledge? Along with the VL standards and the frameworks, we can look to the body of literature on critical librarianship/critical info lit -- including twitter chats, blog posts, or compilations like the Feminist Pedagogies for Library Instruction to consider how we do this, or what it might mean in practice. As discussed in the first presentation, critlib seeks to move away from the “banking” model of education described by Friere, de-centering the classroom and removing the librarian as the single source-of-all-knowledge, and instead focuses on the learner’s own investigation and discovery. A critlib approach to VL considers how learners find, analyze, and use images (e.g. their strategies for seeking information/images) but also recognizes issues related to social justice, or the structures and power at work in how images are arranged/organized, described, and de- or re-contextualized.

We can also look at the work of our colleagues investigating related elements of visual literacy, such as Nicole Beatty’s research on cognitive visual literacy, which encourages students to develop their research questions in response to a visual source (in this case, an image of an equestrian figure from the Djenne-Djenno from Mali), and giving them the opportunity to conduct exploratory research based on those questions. (the recent Visual Literacy for Libraries is an excellent primer too, with exercises that go beyond the previous standards, and hints of critical librarianship.)
For the first iteration of this workshop, I wanted to keep to the spirit of critlib as closely as possible -- and it helped that I didn’t have much time to prepare and overthink the organization of the content. Prior to the session, I spoke briefly with the artist and relayed my basic ideas and intent. We started the workshop with an informal q&a discussion with Brooke, drawing out questions about her processes, including general sources of inspiration, her research and design processes, etc. Because of the nature of her work, this naturally led to questions about visual tropes and stereotypes, and how she was able to use and subvert those in the development of the *Lumberjanes* characters.

After about 20 minutes, we continued this thread of the discussion with students. What’s the role and purpose or use of stock character types in this field of work? Cartoonists and illustrators are often relying on recognizable symbols, images, poses to convey lots of information in a short amount of time -- long enough for you to pick up a comic, or read an accompanying article.

But at what point does something shift from *archetype* into *stereotype*?
For example, I might describe a reluctant hero: somebody with the potential to affect
great change, but not realized until a dire or extreme situation is forced upon them.
Because we’re dealing in archetypes, which are not absolutes, I could be talking
about Frodo Baggins...

Or I could be talking about John McClane. But if I described a character as an “bullish
lawman without respect for authority,” you might only have one idea in mind. This is a
vital difference between archetypes and stereotypes: the former is a starting point,
and can provide a template for any number of varied, interesting characters. The
latter is an end point; it can stifle or kill any kind of character or narrative growth
beyond that very narrow, cliched role.
After this discussion, we moved onto an activity not unlike ours from earlier. I modeled this on a character design exercise developed by Paulo Patricio, a comics artist and educator. As a group, we came up with a list of various archetypes, and a list of stereotypes -- including some “stock” characters like “pirates”. Students then selected one idea from the “archetype” list, and one from the “stereotype” list. Given 10 minutes, the students were tasked with writing a character description, and then drawing a quick sketch of that character using a pre-printed figure template. Half of the students selected “pirate,” the other half “airhead”

How do you think that turned out?
If you guessed “everyone drew a Jack Sparrow copy,” you’d be correct. Students laughed, and seemed initially surprised at the result. However, when I asked them to read their character descriptions, each one had crafted completely unique, interesting characters. So why didn’t that translate into the visual design? Why did they all revert to that particular image? Where did that even come from? Conducting visual (or text-based) research on pirates might have quickly turned this image up. Or maybe it would bring up the work of NC Wyeth, or Howard Pyle. A conversation with a professor or librarian might have turned up some of this original visual source, but would the student/researcher think to question that image -- to read against the source, instead of with it?

We hit our time limit on that workshop, and had some good (if brief) discussions about these questions, and the tools students use -- Google images, Pinterest, suggestions from their friends and professors, books in the library -- but following up on this, and with continued discussions with my colleague Amanda Meeks, a central theme was emerging. To paraphrase from author Daniel Jose Older:
Research is not enough.
Research is not enough.

Research, as we often define it -- as a discrete part of the development or design process, or of the studio work in response -- is not enough.
Research is not enough. Research is an important first step, but it needs to go further to include reflection on the images you find, the way you approach and conduct research, the way you select and adapt sources -- your implicit biases -- and an awareness of what you are or aren’t seeing. A critical, self-reflective and questioning kind of literacy is necessary to move beyond the immediate and the easy, the stale, the boring, the oppressive, the harmful.

Because research may not always help one to determine intent versus impact.
Research might not tell you that framing can take you from showing a powerful, lively Pakistani-American teenager from Jersey, and reducing her to a pulpy pinup. It might not tell you how this subtle shift in framing alters a character’s visual impact -- because it speaks to intent on the part of the artist.
Framing is important. Gaze is important. It takes a 15-year-old, MIT student computer-whiz who reverse engineered Iron Man’s suit, and turns her into cheesecake. Research might lead you to criticisms of the trope of the hypersexualized woman of color...
....or the tendency of some audiences to read black persons -- particularly, black young men -- as being older, and somehow less 'innocent' than white children
Research is not enough. If you approach a character design from an already biased perspective, unaware of habits or reliance on tropes, you run the risk of selecting those visual or textual sources that only reinforce what you’re expecting. Confirmation bias happens if you don’t know what to ask of yourself, or don’t have the tools to interrogate your processes and habits.
With this in mind, my colleague Amanda Meeks and I had discussions on how the workshop could be modified to include more than cartoonists or illustrators -- any kind of artist (including writing) who works with character development. To align the work more closely with some feminist pedagogical practices, the workshop time was extended and the prompts adapted to include reflective creative prompts, and culminated in the production of a zine.

Because I don’t want to scoop Amanda’s work, this talk won’t go as much into her work on the project -- but you can learn about it in the article we’re eventually co-publishing, or you can see the research guide we developed (and which may eventually move and expand). We also maintain a Zotero reading group -- please join us, and add your thoughts!
libguide + reading lists

Break the Stereotype! Workshop Guide:

http://scad.libguides.com/breakthestereotype

Zotero reading group:

https://www.zotero.org/groups/break_the_stereotype
credits + further reading


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