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Science meets comics

A project funded by UW-Madison explores new ways of presenting research

BY [VICTORIA DAVIS](#)

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It started with three friends meeting at a bar, where they taught themselves how to draw comics. UW-Madison graduate science students Khoa Tran, Jaye Gardiner and Kelly Montgomery met every Saturday in 2015 to doodle and digitize their art. But through word of mouth and social media sharing, those weekends of sketching evolved into what is now JKK Comics.

JKK has published more than a [half dozen comic stories](#) on its website, illustrating links between HPV and cancer, and how the gut protects itself from invaders with its “microbial army.” The initials JKK stand for Jaye, Khoa and Kelly, with the “X” a variable representation of anyone interested in getting involved.

“What we wanted to do was to try and find alternative means for science education by doing what we love, which is comics,” says Tran, a postdoctoral fellow who studies the disruption of cell division. “We wanted to make these difficult concepts more approachable, but one of the problems with JKK is that all the members are scientists. We try our best to make it all understandable, but the best thing is collaboration.”

This desire for wider collaboration led to JKK’s latest project, Gaining STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art and math). Funded by UW’s art and business grant program, teams of university-based scientists and artists are working to create six comic books, covering topics ranging from the sound vibrations of stars to the psychology of oppressed transgender individuals.

“The purpose of science talks is not about just vomiting out a bunch of data; it’s about delivering a message, and this is a way more scientists can better reach the public,” says Rashpal Dhillon, who is doing postdoctoral research on the hibernation habits of wild rodents. Dhillon met Tran while working at adjacent labs in the Wisconsin Institute for Discovery and has signed on as a “scientist artist” for Gaining STEAM.

UW’s Center for the Humanities research group [Applied Comics Kitchen!](#) also uses [comics as a channel for teaching](#) and research, but Gaining STEAM is a separate project.

The storytelling component of the comics project is enhanced by the work of Holly Walter Kerby, the founder and executive director of [Fusion Science Theater](#), a Madison-based performing arts organization that uses visual storytelling to communicate complex science. Kerby became aware of JKK after meeting Tran at the 2017 [Wisconsin Science Festival](#). Both creative scientists expressed an interest in working together and, last spring, the opportunity presented itself when the JKK team first pitched a comic book project at UW's Arts and Business Grant Competition.

Kerby, who taught chemistry and playwriting at Madison College, has traveled across the country teaching scientists how to use storytelling to present their research. In October, Kerby led the first of Gaining STEAM's two fall workshops, which presented the fundamentals of turning a story into a comic.



Holly Walter Kerby, center, works with Lena Vincent, left, and Rashpal Dhillon to develop comic stories based on their scientific research.

“I really felt like we’d not only got the golden eggs but we found the goose, because we figured out how to take story and use it to teach,” says Kerby. “Nobody trains scientists to connect with an audience. They’re always focused on their work, but you can’t get people to open up their mind and be engaged with something just by showing them facts. People think in stories, so you have to show them a better story.”

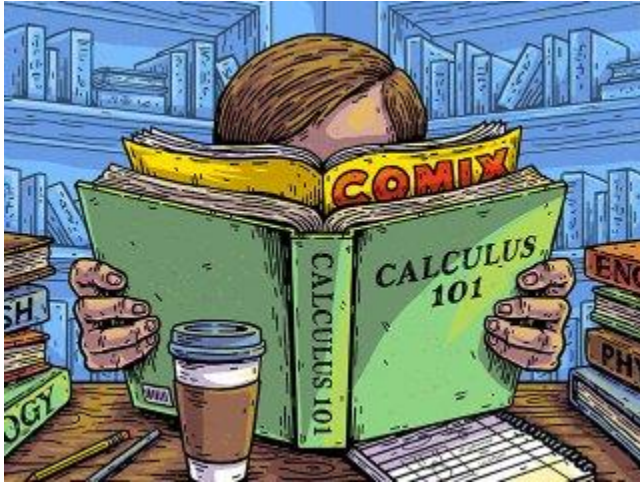
Gardiner, a researcher on the growth habits of pancreatic cancer, led an Oct. 22 workshop at Steenbock Library. Kerby worked alongside Tran to help graduate science students Gilbert Loiseau and Rachel Salemi create rough storyboards for their comics. After exercising their skills with cut-outs of *Calvin and Hobbes* comics, Loiseau and Salemi began sketching out their protagonists, antagonists and research plots. By the end of the three hours, the entire table was covered in red sticky notes and orange flashcards.

“Comics are great at conveying complicated ideas, and we have complicated ideas,” says Jacqueline Goldstein, a graduate student in astronomy, who gives monthly three-minute talks with Kerby for Saturday Science at the Wisconsin Institute for Discovery. “Whenever I think about communication now, I start with ‘Who’s my audience?’ I practiced talking about my research using story with my sister and she was like, ‘Oh, now I finally understand what you do!’”

These days, Gaining STEAM participants are in the early stages of completing their story boards and developing visuals with their artists, aiming for a showcase in April. In the future, the group hopes to compile all the comics into one large anthology to be distributed for free to K-12 schools and colleges all over Wisconsin.

“As cognitive scientists, we think in stories,” says Kerby. “There’s this guy at Harvard who did a brain scan of all these people showing that each brain activity was different. But when he told them all a story, their brain patterns suddenly were the same. Storytelling makes it easier to teach people science because now you’ve synced your brains with the person telling the story. You connect, and then you care.”

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