



Teaching with _____

Comics

***Everything
you need
to know to
start teaching
with Comics!***



**Andrew Smith
Education 4262**

Excelsior!



Well, a number of reasons really. As teachers I believe we need all the resources we can get if we're going to teach as effectively as possible. And, as comics seem to be one of the few prominent mediums – others being film, television, novels, poetry, drama, and the Internet – ignored by most educators, I thought it a decent topic to shed some much needed light on.

In addition to that it could be that there is already a good deal of information out there regarding the use of comics in the classroom, much of which could be used to considerable effectiveness in any English Language Arts classroom.

I suppose it could also be because the comic publishers of North America have paid me to do this. Chances are though, that is just this poor writer's weak attempt at humour, something readily found in many comics.

Truth be told, though, my reasons for dedicating this assignment to a discussion of comics run much deeper. To this day I can still remember my first experience with a comic. I don't remember how old I was or even where I was, but I remember picking up an issue of **The Amazing Spider-Man** and, as one more eloquently than I put it, falling in "never entirely to emerge." And that is a kind of magic I would love to share with my future students, even if only a few are touched by it.

Until such a time, Excelsior!

What is a Comic?



Defining exactly what is referred to by the term 'comic' is not as easy as one might think. Comics are at best, misunderstood, and at worst, frequently stereotyped. For many, comics are nothing more than *"crude, poorly drawn, semiliterate, cheap, disposable, kiddie fare"* (McCloud 3 – an example of a such a comic is pictured to the right). Further stereotypes include ideas that comics are required to be humorous, or that only 'uncool', teenage boys read comics, or that comics only contain stories of super heroes.



The truth, just as with anything in life, is rarely so simple. Comics, just like other forms of media, are limited only by the imaginations of their creators. To address the various stereotypes often forced on comics, first comics do not have to be funny – I would hazard that there are more dramatic comics than humorous ones. Second, many people read comics; while male readers do outnumber female readers, there are nonetheless many comics directed at a female audience. Third, both sexes can find appropriate comics for any age – indeed there are a number of comics clearly intended for an adult audience. Lastly, while comics depicting the adventures of super-heroes are very common, there are a number of books wherein a caped crusader would likely never appear.

Ultimately, comics are as diverse as any other medium. The only necessary feature of a comic is that it must combine static images – whether they are sectioned into panels (as seen to the left) or free of restriction (as seen to the right) – and a story, which is often, though not always, conveyed through text. Beyond those defining characteristics, comics can and do take on a stunning plethora of styles.



However, before discussing the various elements and styles of comics and how they can be used in the classroom, it is important to define the categories of comics that one can encounter.



Comics, Trade Paper Backs,



Graphic Novels, and Webcomics

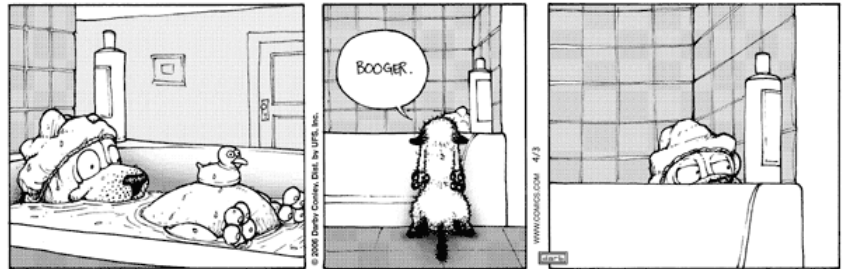
Comics

It is best to consider 'comic' as a blanket term that can, and very often does, encompass all of the following more specific terms.

Comic Strip:

Today this term specifies a comic in the style that appears in a newspaper. These comics utilize panels, having a minimum of one and usually a maximum of three or four. While these 'strips' may centre on the same cast of characters in each strip, the accompanying stories are often meant to stand on their own (i.e. they do not require the reader to be aware of previous strips to understand the current one).

Humour is the primary genre, and most strips are written and drawn by a single creator (Example: Darby Conley's Get Fuzzy).



© Darby Conley/Dist. by UFS, Inc.

Comic Book:

A comic book is basically a comic strip that runs on for a number of pages (22 is the industry standard). Although the stories contained within a comic book are, like comic strips, meant to stand on their own, comic books are typically part of a serial story, and frequently require the reader to have knowledge of past issues.

Further, very few strips are completed by a single creator. Usually a writer, an artist, an inker, a letterer, and a colourist are the minimum requirements. The super-hero genre is most commonly found in this style of comic. (Example: Detective Comic's Superman).



Trade Paper Back

A Trade Paper Back can still be classified as a comic,

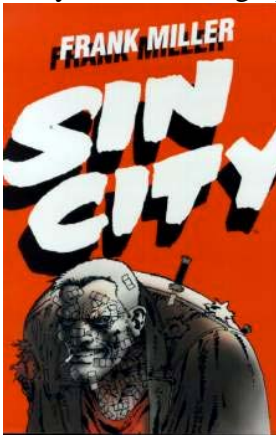


however, with the increase in production of these books in recent years they have come to occupy a classification of their own in popular terminology. Simply put, a trade paper back is a collection of comic books all bound together in one edition. Usually these 'trades' are organized around a single story that may expand over several issues. For instance, if a story took place in issues #475 - #495 in Marvel Comic's Amazing Spider-Man, they could be collected in a trade (such as the one pictured to the right).

With sales of comic books declining in recent years and the durability of a trade (compared to an individual book), trades are seen with increased frequency, even to the point that they are showing up in bookstores – a locale traditionally devoid of comics.

Graphic Novel

A graphic novel is somewhat similar to a trade paper back; it is constructed in a similar manner – more durable, more book like – and contains a story from start to finish – though, again like trade paper backs, the characters of a graphic novel may appear in further works. Where graphic novels differ is that their stories are usually highly complex and, when coupled with the content, are directed at adult audiences. Further, like the story, the art of a graphic novel is often more freely artistic (less panelled). The difference



in story and art sometimes leads to the idea that graphic novels are superior in literary and artistic content than other comics. A prominent example (it was recently made into a movie) is Frank Miller's Sin City books (pictured left – please keep in mind that I DO NOT recommend this particular book for classroom use due to its adult content (the movie was rated '18A')).

Webcomics

Like many things the world over, so to have comics been transposed onto the Internet. Yet, unlike other genres of literature that have merely been 'reprinted' or 'repackaged' on the Internet, comics have been recreated in cyberspace. Beginning in the late '90s, comics – mostly strips – began to appear on the Internet, which allowed some significant changes in the medium.



First and foremost, Internet comics, or as pop culture defines them, webcomics, have no publisher; they are self-published by the creators. As such, the webcomic community is wide open to anyone who has the know-how and time (note: talent is not a prerequisite) to produce their own strip. Accordingly, quality varies widely – from amateur level comics produced by people in their spare time to professional comics produced by those lucky enough to make a living on their work. Second, without the restrictions imposed by publishers or syndicates, the content of comics also varies widely. While some webcomics are appropriate for all ages, the majority would receive ratings equivalent to a 14A movie.

As stated, the strip form dominates webcomics and most often humour is the genre in question. Also, as webcomics are most akin to strips printed in newspapers, updates (i.e. new comics) range from weekly to a daily schedules (though the average would be roughly 4 times per week). Given the points noted above and the dangers of the internet, caution should be exercised when approaching webcomics, especially if they are intended for classroom use. (Example: arguably the most popular – millions of viewers per day – webcomic, Mike Krahulik and Jerry Holkin's **Penny Arcade**).

Comics in the Classroom

When one thinks of comics and their place in the classroom, images of teacher's confiscating comics from students who are trying to read them in secret often come to mind. In spite of this stigma, however, comics can play a powerful, influential role in the English Language Arts classroom, and can have a positive impact on the learning habits of



many students. In today's world of instant entertainment – movies, video games, the Internet – comics can provide a powerful median between literature and visual entertainment.

Keep in mind, however, that while evidence will be given for several areas wherein comics can prove effective resources for the teacher and student, it should be noted that comics are intended to supplement other aspects of the English Language Arts Classroom, not replace them.

Comics and Reading

Ironically, many people believe that comics make poor reading materials, or that they will negatively impact reading skills. This belief could not be further from the truth. Many studies have shown that comics provide excellent resources for students who struggle with reading on skill and/or motivational levels. For instance:

> With the combination of text and illustration, comics are powerful aids for students who excel at visual learning or who have short attention spans.

> Comics prompt the development of powerful imaginations. In studying education, many educational theorists site the theory of scaffolding – students receiving incrementally decreased aid at a skill until they are able to master it on their own. Comics provide an excellent practical scaffolding resource and do so on many levels. While the text is often the heart of the story, it is reinforced and furthered through the illustrations. This not only aids in development of reading skills for students in earlier grades, but allows advanced students to visualize the story and the characters.

> The illustrations in comics can also further a student's analysis of the literature and reinforce the power of words. Illustrations act as clues to what is being conveyed in the text. Remove the words and note what happens to the story – typically, it loses a considerable amount. Such a demonstration can go a long way to developing students' precision and comfort with language production.

Ultimately, comics are a powerful tool for the teaching of reading and literary analysis at any grade level. If nothing else, comics are another reading resource, and like any other, they can only increase a student's confidence in their abilities, and may even prompt a further interest in reading. As with any teaching resource, their application is limited only by the imagination of the teacher.



~ “Visual communication is rich, evocative, and immediate, and transcends barriers that language sometimes raises. When pictures and words are used together to communicate, the result can be much greater than either alone could produce.” ~

*~ Elizabeth B. Thomsen,
100 Graphic Novels for Public Libraries*

Comics as Literature

Although most comics are crafted with entertainment in mind, this does not hold true to the entire genre, nor are those comics designed to entertain limited to that result. Many comics are or should be considered works of powerful literature. Just as any other medium, comics are able to raise and shed light on important issues, prompting critical thought and reflection.

For example, Art Spiegelman wrote the graphic novels **Maus I & II** as a medium for relating his father’s experiences in Holocaust Germany. Interestingly Spiegelman depicts the Jewish people of his work in the form of walking talking mice, while the Germans are personified similarly as cats. While the books have their comedic moments, it is a powerful and tragic tale of a Jewish family’s journey from pre-Holocaust, through the Holocaust and beyond.



Another prominent example is found in the pages of a Marvel (the company that publishes Spider-Man, among other titles) comic book. Shortly after the events of 9/11, Marvel dedicated its flagship book – **The Amazing Spider-Man** – as a tribute to the heroes – the police, firefighters and so on – who saved so many lives in the disaster (see image on the following page). The comic (**Amazing Spider-Man #36, December 2001**) dedicated to this disaster were tastefully done, made an incredibly powerful tribute, and was well received.

Beyond these points, however, comics are also important pieces of literature for the classroom in that they provide insight about issues relevant to the world, and quite often, to the youth of the world. Many comics have dealt with drug abuse, suicide, aids, and so forth and all have done so by providing strong role models and lessons for both young men and women. Moreover, while some comics are violent, many – those with a young audience in mind – present violence in a tasteful manner and with very real consequences.

Once again, as with any other medium, comics can provide stunning examples of



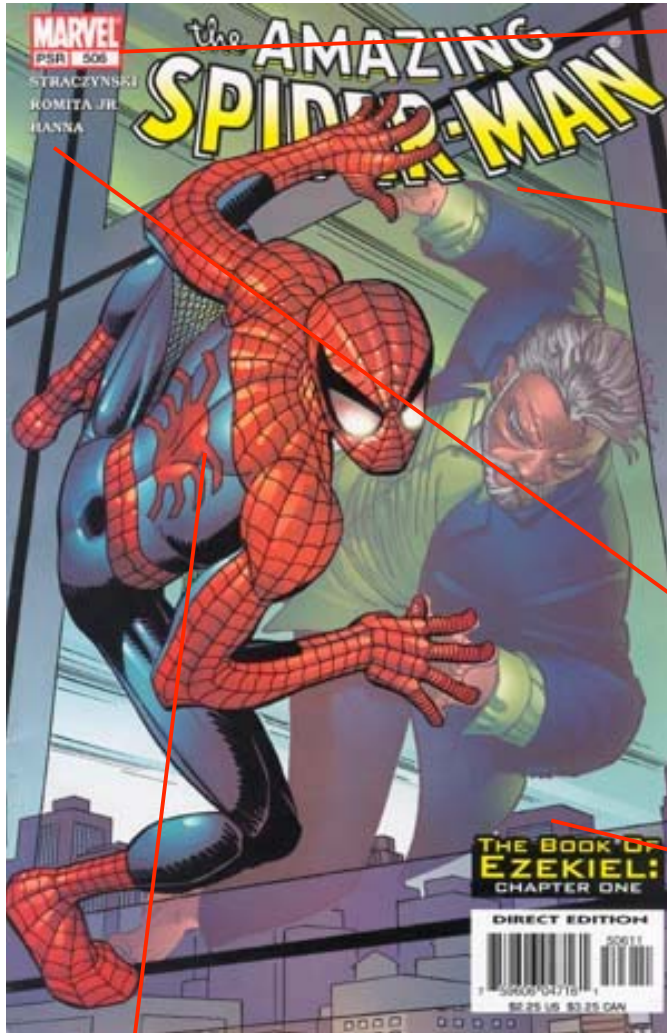
literature, fit not only for assisting students with their reading and skills of literary analysis, but literature that would make a noted impact to the syllabi of any English Language Arts class, at the secondary level or otherwise.



Dissecting a Comic

Okay, so you can differentiate between a comic, a trade paper back, and a graphic novel, but do you know how to discuss a comic? What are the features of each page called? How about where to find important information? Just take a look at the following:

Title Page



Publisher: The company responsible for publishing the book. In this case the publisher is Marvel.

Main Title: The title of the comic denoting the series it belongs to. In this instance the book is #506 of The Amazing Spider-Man series.

Credits: Lists the contributors to the book. Usually the writer first, followed by the artist and the inker.

Subtitle: Title of the individual issue.

Cover Image: Meant to capture the reader's attention. Usually depicts a scene from the book.

Inside the Book



A Caption: Refers to a speech box that contains narration; that is, speech not thought or spoken by one of the characters. Keep in mind, however, that thoughts of a character can appear in a box just like this. The only way to truly tell caption from speech/thought is by reading it.

Panel: A single image is contained within a panel. In modern comics, as opposed to traditional ones like this image, panels are not always used, and when used, they are not as restrictive as they once were.

Gutter: The space between panels. Traditional comics, such as this one confine action to the panels. Modern comics, on the other hand, are not so restricted; gutters, like panels, are often broken or used as underlying images.

Thought Bubble: Contain thoughts of the indicated character. These words represent dialogue internal to that character.

Dialogue Balloons: Contain words spoken by the indicated character.



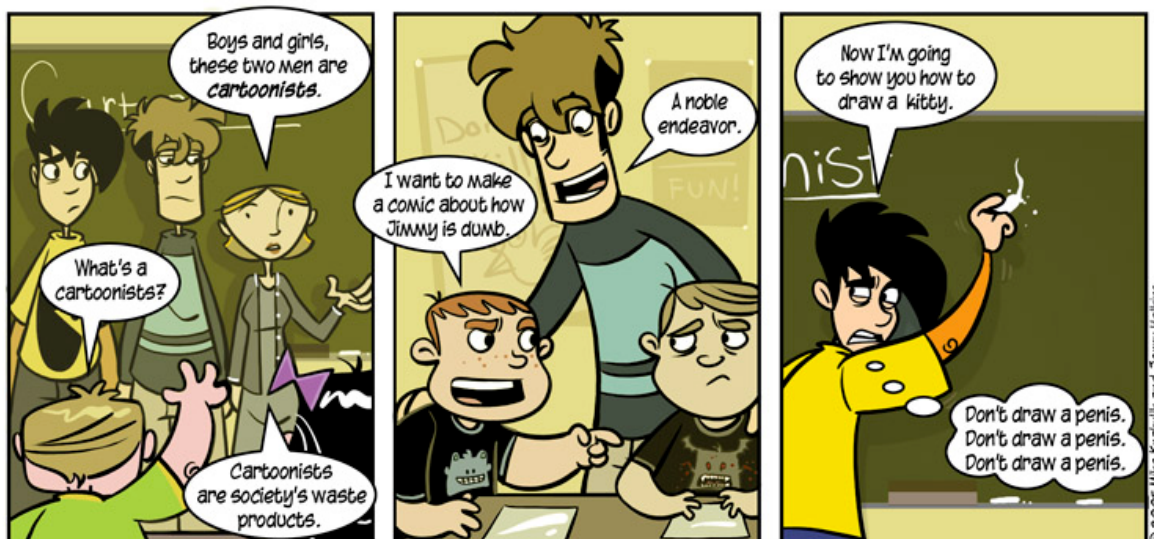
Comics in the



Classroom

The absolute first thing to keep in mind when deciding to use comics in the classroom, is that they are just like any other form of literature; students need to be taught how to read and analyze comics. Just as a teacher would not put a Shakespearean play in front of a student and simply instruct him or her to read, neither should that teacher do so with comics. Do not assume students have had significant experience with comics.

Second, as mentioned in passing several times, it is important to note that **not** all comics are directed at children and/or young adults (as the example below illustrates; another **Penny Arcade**). Each comic has a specific audience and it is always important to read the work in question in its entirety before using it in the classroom. Further, this should be a prominent consideration when choosing to use webcomics in the classroom. While some can appear innocuous at first, that may only be that day's comic. Accordingly it is a good idea to browse through the comic's archive (past comics) before using a strip (note: many webcomics have *thousands* of archived strips, which would take days or more to read; however, a quick glance through the archives should point out any adult themes fairly quickly).



Thus, having spent time educating students on the basics of comics and gathering the necessary reading materials, the question now stands as to what is to be done with a comic in an English Language Arts classroom? The following pages contain a variety of

sample lesson activities. Following that, recommendations are offered as to what comics, trade paperbacks, etc. would make a welcome addition to any class. As well, information is also offered on where teachers may find additional information about using comics in their teaching practices.

Lesson Activities

Reading Aloud:

To improve and practice upon students' oral reading skills, have students take turns reading a set amount of a comic aloud to the class. In addition to reading the comic aloud, however, students must also describe the actions of each panel/page without revealing the images to the rest of the class.

Applications:

> Excellent for practicing students' skills with reading, following, and interpreting dramatic literature. Cues students to pay attention not only to the spoken dialogue, but to the actions that are implicit with that dialogue

Questions:

> What effect do the images have on the text?
> Would the story remain the same without the images? If not, how would it change?

Titles:

Present students with a variety of strips that have had the titles removed (or had no titles to begin with). Students are charged with reading the strip, assessing the themes, ideas, images, and so forth and coming up with a title for the strip, as well as the appropriate justification.

Applications:

> A break from the mundane routines of regular reading comprehension exercises.

Questions:

> If the strip was originally given a title by the author, asks students how their title compares to the author's? If they differ, can students account for the difference?
> What does this say about the author and how he interpreted his or her own work?

Example: The following strip (from Zach Miller's webcomic **Joe & Monkey**, March 22, 2006) is one I would title, "De Nile: Not Just a River in Egypt."



The original title of the strip is “Delicious Pizza Roles.” The discrepancy is probably due to my poor sense of humour. Or maybe the author was just hungry? A simple exercise, but one students can have fun with.

Character Deductions:

Using either an image of a character or a quotation, have students deduce what kind of person that character may be. To begin only have a student use either quotes from the character or images of him or her. After the student has completed a short character sketch of their character based on the information they have been provided with, show them information they did not use (whether images or quotes) and have students compare their sketch with the character.

Applications:

- > Practices literary analysis, based on art and text.
- > Fosters critical thinking skills.
- > Prompts students to use knowledge they already possess, but may not be aware of.
- > With using text information, students are prompted to foster critical thought skills inherent in studying dramatic characters.
- > With using pictorial information, students are prompted to use critical thought skills inherent in studying literary characters (i.e. what can we infer about this character from his appearance?).

Questions:

- > What led you to make those deductions about your character?
- > Can you account for the differences between your character sketch and the actual character? If so, what led you to make deductions that were not in line with the character?

Extensions:

- > Have students complete this activity at the before reading through a work of literature. This can lead into techniques of making a more complete character sketch, as well as analysing how characters can change from beginning to end of a story (i.e. static and dynamic characters).

Example:



- > What could be inferred about a student whose appearance was as such? (re: left)

- > Or, what could be inferred about a character that spoke as such:
 - > *“Thus I was left alone in the world, possessed of nothing but my wits, which are sharper than my face would credit... and men would call me beast or troll and fling muck and stones at me...”*

Set the Scene:

Present students with a script of a comic and have them choose one scene to act out in static possess. For beginning instances the script could contain all text – narration, dialogue, though, and sound effects – but as students progress with their abilities with the activity, slowly edit out portions of the text until students are left only with the dialogue. After students perform their scene, present them with the original text allowing them to compare how they interpreted the textual elements with how they were presented in the book.

Applications:

- > Strong ties to dramatic literary analysis; students will gain practice at decoding the actions of a text from dialogue.
 - > Can easily be transferred to a dramatic text and have the students apply what they have learned.

Questions:

- > Pose questions to students on what lead them to make the decisions they did in regards to their actions (or posses).

Cross Media Analysis:

With the strong place for film in today’s society, many more comics than ever before are being transferred to the big screen. Just as you would study a novel, have students study a trade paper back or graphic novel and then compare the comic version with the film version.

Application:

- > Again, prepares students for cross media analysis with other genres: novels to film, dramatic works to film.



> Although similar to a cross media analysis of a literary work, there is considerable difference too. A comic, certainly more easily than a novel or dramatic work, serves as a potential storyboard for a film. As such students can directly compare discrepancies between page and film.

Questions:

- > Ask students to ponder why the filmmakers choose to remove some scenes or add others.
- > What considerations are there in transferring a story between two mediums? Between comic and film? Novel and film? Dramatic work and film?
- > Which scenes would have been most difficult to transfer to the screen?
- > (More generally) What is the difference between a comic and a film? How do these differences impact each medium? What are the limitations of film? The limitations of comics?

Example:

> Very recently a film titled **V for Vendetta** was released based on the graphic novel of the same name, by Alan Moore. As there are a number of differences between the two versions, this would make for an interesting candidate for this kind of assignment.



Order the Panels:

Best done with a panelled comic, this activity asks students to order the panels of a comic that have been distributed randomly. Initially, this activity can be completed with the

panels complete, but as students gain more proficiency remove text from panels, and even ask students to reassemble the panels and add their own text to complete a story.

Applications:

- > Gives students their own practice with forming a sequential narrative story, based on increasingly free guidelines.
- > Reinforces the relation between image and text and how the two have to interact to form a successful story.

Questions:

- > As usually ask students to justify or explain their decisions.
- > Is there another possibly way in which the tiles could be put together?

Extensions:

- > This is a precursor to having students create their own comic, or really any original sequential narrative.

Example:

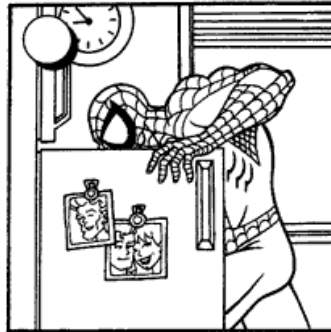
- > Very simplistic, but it gets the basics of the idea across:



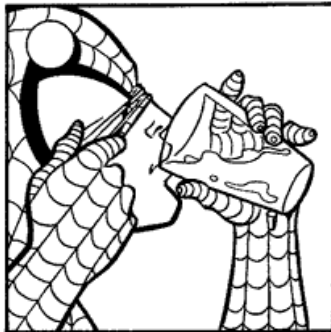
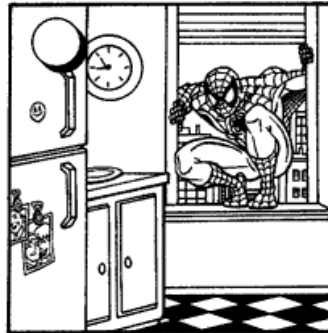
Take a Break

With MARVEL

SPIDERMAN



Spidy is stopping at home for a glass of milk. But the pictures here are not in order. Write number 1 in the circle on the picture that comes first. Write number 2 in the circle on the picture that is second. Finish numbering until all five pictures are in the correct order.



Try It!

- ⌚ Where was Spidey just before he came home? Draw and write what happened before picture 1.
- 🍌 What would be a healthy snack for Spidey to eat during his milk break? Draw it on the kitchen counter.



Goals of Bringing Comics into the ELA Classroom

1. Reading Skills

Bottom line, the more experience students have with reading, regardless of age, grade, or ability, the better they will be at it as well as its associated tasks. By bringing comics into the classroom teachers present students with one more pool from which to draw reading materials. Not all students will take up the habit, but some certainly will be inclined to.

2. Expanding Teaching Resources

A large part of teaching is having students practice the same skills in newfound ways. With comics as a potential resource, teachers have one more place from which to draw ideas and materials and are thus run that much less of a risk of becoming dry. Plus, comics are one more step away from worksheets, something that students want to avoid and that teachers should avoid.

Further, as comics possess some of the attributes of novel, dramatic work, and film, they can act as a support or scaffold for each aspect of teaching. As already mentioned comics support a variety of activities that can provide new and exciting ways to practice literary skills.

3. Bring English Language Arts into the 21st Century

No one would deny that the works of Shakespeare belong in any ELA Classroom, and while Shakespeare's works and others like them are universal, students often have trouble relating. Comics are a powerful, modern, and current medium that bring up contemporary issues faced by students of all ages, genders, and races. Any literature that discusses such issues, especially one that does so in a unique way, would make a welcome edition to any ELA classroom.



Recommended

Comics

Deciding what materials and resources to bring into ones classroom is always a personal choice, but if you are looking to use comics in your teaching here are a few that will get you started along the right path.

Amazing Spider-Man #36 (December 2001)

As mentioned this comic is a tribute to the heroes of 9/11 from the heroes of Marvel comics. Truly a moving piece, with powerful, yet tragic images, and a profound message of hope. Something worth studying in any setting.

Batman: The Dark Knight Returns

This one may appeal more to boys than girls, but nonetheless worth a look. Chronicles the tale of an aged Batman, returned to his fight against crime late in life. Unable to give up the thrill of the cape and cowl, Batman takes up his duty once more only to find his old enemies have returned. Violence may be an issue, but a powerful character study is present.

Maus I & II

As already mentioned, these two works by Art Spiegelman (pictured a self-made caricature below-left) chronicle the life of Spiegelma's father in Holocaust Germany. First published in 1987, these works



reminded the world that comics can in fact be considered literature, as Spiegelman's story purveyed his father's life of hardships and touching a relationship between father and son. Adding further power to the work is Spiegelman's unique, quaint, yet moving art. Spiegelman won the Pulitzer for these books 1992.



in



in

Marvel 1602

Written by famed writer Neil Gaimen and marvellous illustrated by Adam Kubert, Marvel 1602 places contemporary heroes in England just at the end of Queen Elizabeth's reign. Some liberties are taken with historical details, but nonetheless, this is a truly powerful

story.

Further Reading...

For further information on using comics in educational settings consult the following resources.

> **Comics in the Classroom: A Site for Teachers, Parents, and Librarians**

~ <http://comicsintheclassroom.net>

> **Teaching with Comic Books and Graphic Novels**

~ www2.mcdaniel.edu/slm/student/obrienm/weblinkbibliography.htm

> **The National Association of Comics Art Educators**

~ www.teachingcomics.org

> **Whatcha Gonna Learn From Comics: How to Use Comics to Teach Languages**

~ Jerry Steinberg

> **Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art**

~ by Scott McCloud (Also visit his website at www.scottmccloud.com)

Lastly, if you are looking for additional information about comics, particularly which ones would be suitable for in class use, consult the comic shops in your area. The men and women who run these stores have a phenomenal wealth of knowledge about the subject that often goes under appreciated and unused.



Works Cited

CBS Broadcasting. "Newest Teaching Tool: Comic Books." The Early Show: Study Hall. March 25, 2005. CBS Broadcasting Inc. 24 March, 2006.
<<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/03/25/earlyshow/living/studyhall/main683050.shtml>>

McCloud, Scott. Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art. Northampton, Massachusetts: Kitchen Sink Press Inc., 1993.

O'Brien, Melissa C. "Teaching with Comic Books and Graphic Novels." 2003. 24 March, 2006.
<<http://www2.mcdaniel.edu/slm/student/obrienm/weblinkbibliography.htm>>

Pennella, Brenda. "Graphic Novels: The POW!-er in the Classroom!: A Teacher's Perspective." Brodart: the Library Experts. 2003. Brodart Co. 24 March, 2006.
<http://www.graphicnovels.brodart.com/teachers_perspective.htm>

Sims, Mike. "Comics in the Classroom." Ninth Art. 2001-2005. Mike Sims. 24 March, 2006. <<http://www.ninthart.com/display.php?article=185>>

Steinberg, Jerry. Whatcha Gonna Learn From Comics? How to use Comics to Teach Languages. Markham, Ontario: Pippin Publishing Limited, 1992.

Tychinski, Stan. "Building a New Reader Base." Brodart: the Library Experts. 2003. Brodart Co. 24 March, 2006
<http://www.graphicnovels.brodart.com/new_readers.htm>

Please note: all images are copyright of their original publishers. If required, a list can be provided as to where each one was acquired.

