2013

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Pam McCombs

Eastern Michigan University

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Recommended Citation

McCombs, Pam (2013) "Making and Understanding Comics, Three Panels at a Time," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 29: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1979>

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METHODS

Making and Understanding Comics, Three Panels at a Time

PAM MCCOMBS

As a first-year writing instructor at a mid-western university, I have used comics to help my composition students add detail to their narratives and revise their interviews in the long ethnographic essays that are a part of the first-year writing program. Why comics? What I've learned is that transforming writing into another medium helps students see detail and revision in a new light.

One of the first activities I use is the three-panel comic. Students create their own three-panel comic after a class discussion on Scott McCloud's (1993; 2006) icons and taxonomies on clarity, panel transitions, and word/picture combinations. Incorporating three-panel comics gives the visual, kinesthetic, and multimodal learners a chance to shine, while challenging those aural, read/write learners to communicate understanding in a different way and broadening their writing strategies.

My pedagogical rationale for incorporating this three-panel comic activity into a composition course, is that it allows all the modes of learning along with reading and writing—image, gaze, gesture, movement, music, speech, and sound effect (Jewett & Kress, 2003)—to be employed. I want to reach all the different types of learners in my classroom. I envision literacy as an interlaced phenomenon, like an old-fashioned lace doily, with the modes of learning as different colored threads woven into language, culture, time, and place to communicate meaning (Heath, 1999, p. 103; Jewett & Kress, 2003, p. 1; Street, 1999, p. 37). I created my own literacy doily to help me fully understand how complex this phenomenon can be for each person. And because my vision of literacy is like a lace doily I know all my students' literacy or literacies can be just as complex and intricate, and each student will have a doily of different shapes and colors.

I precede the comic activity with a short one-page narrative that becomes part of a familiar genre study project. The narrative is about a childhood memory—it can be about time spent with a grandparent, parents reading a favorite

book to them, a much retold event about the child, or just a learning experience, like learning how to ride a bike. This gives students a piece to create a comic about. I tell them a few of my own memories and I have them read narrative examples such as Sherman Alexie's "Superman and Me" and Maya Angelou's "Grandmother's Victory." This writing is done as homework.

In the next class I introduce comics and graphic novels, using the beginning of Scott McCloud's (1993) chapter two from *Understanding Comics* that has a great section on icons. I project these pages (p. 24-31) onto a screen and read selected panels that describe the difference between symbols and icons and how human beings can translate something as simple as a circle with two dots and a line into a face. I draw some simple images on the board and ask the students to name them (a tree, a stop sign, a house, and a stick figure), to further illustrate to students the simplicity of the icon. I ask for other examples and draw them on the board. I emphasize that these drawings do not have to be perfect to convey meaning. I do this to calm the fears of those students who insist they cannot draw. I remind the students it isn't the drawing I'm looking at in this activity; it is the clarity of context, the transitions, and the choice of words—the same thing I look for in the students' writing.

I follow this with my favorite section from chapter three on closure, where McCloud (1993) explains how we only use one of our senses, our eyes, to read the panels, but we use all of our senses in the gutters, the white spaces between the panels (p. 88-90). McCloud uses the metaphor of a trapeze artist to illustrate how the brain rapidly makes connections in between panels, so that the "reader might learn to fly" (p. 90).

This metaphor explains how the brain gets all the senses working, so that we can hear, smell, feel, and see a kitchen in just four simple panels. One panel is of a pot of water boiling, the next of hands chopping a cucumber, the third of a woman in a kitchen, and last of a ticking timer (McCloud, 1993, p. 88) that "trapeze" us into a kitchen. It's

always interesting to ask how many have imagined their kitchen. I usually have several students raise their hands or nod their head yes.

I then hand out a packet that consists of McCloud's taxonomies on the five clarity choices from *Making Comics* (2006), the six panel transitions from *Understanding Comics* (1993), and the seven word/picture combinations from *Making Comics* (2006) (Appendix A). I give the class a chance to ask questions about each of the taxonomies. Then, I divide them up into small groups and hand each group a graphic novel opened to a double-page spread. For this activity, choose any comic, manga, or graphic novel that you feel comfortable discussing with your specific age group of students.

Each group reads their spread three times. First reading, they discuss the content of the spread. Second reading, using the transition taxonomy, they determine which transitions the author has used. And third reading, using the word/picture combination taxonomy, they identify what word/picture

explain how the beginning of a new class is my choice of moment. Their memory narrative is their choice of moment. My choice of frame shows the place, the front of a classroom. My choice of images I have drawn are simple icons, of a desk, a chair, a computer on the desk, a white board in the background, and a stick-figure instructor, all viewed from a fly-on-the-wall perspective. My choices of words are first a thought, then a greeting, and last a sound effect in bubbles or balloons. My choice of flow shows the teacher entering the classroom, greeting the students, and writing the word comics on the board. I then explain my comic uses McCloud's (1993) transitions for action-to-action and moment-to-moment, and word/picture combinations of intersecting and duo-specific.

After showing some additional examples, I draw three panels on the board with a gutter between each and ask the students to do the same on their blank piece of paper. Just having them decide on the size and shape of their panels helps them put pencil to paper.

I remind them to put their name on the comic and ask them to write the transitions and the word/picture combinations they use, referring to the taxonomies, as they begin to draw. I also remind them to use icons of stick figures, icons for background, and icons as identifiers, as we talked about earlier and as the examples illustrate.

Figure 1. Model Three Panel Narrative

combinations the author has used. The groups discover that the artist/authors have usually utilized more than one of the transitions and word/picture combinations.

I really like this group exercise because students begin to understand transitions and that they are just as important in comics as they are in writing—sentence-to-sentence and paragraph-to-paragraph. As Fleischer and Andrew-Vaughn (2009) explain in *Writing Outside Your Comfort Zone*, “comic writer-artists use many of the same processes as other writers” (p. 55). It is this process that I want students to be immersed in as they turn to their memory narratives into three-panel comics.

To help the students begin, I project my own my comic onto the screen and ask them to look at the third taxonomy on clarity, from McCloud's *Making Comics* (2006). As we go over the five choices: choice of moment, choice of frame, choice of image, choice of words, and choice of flow, I

Depending on the amount of time left—first-year students need at least fifteen to twenty minutes to create a three-panel comic—those who are finished can turn in their comic at the end of class, those who need more time can turn it in at the beginning of the next class. As the students begin to draw, silence settles over the room. Students can get so engrossed in their creations that I usually have to tell them when class is over. I love this aspect of using comics in my teaching.

Other Uses of Comics

I have also used this activity with literature, asking students to create a three-panel comic of their favorite moment from an assigned book. This activity helps students transfer what they have read into a visual understanding. Ideally, they are gaining insights about the text as they complete this transmedia translation.

Around the middle of the semester, I have students make a six-panel comic to help them envision their interviews of a person in their planned career, which is part of the third project, a research profile article. For this project I introduce the students to Will Eisner's (2008) chapter "Expressive Anatomy," from *Comics and Sequential Art*, along with McCloud's treatment of facial expressions from *Making Comics* (2006, p. 83-88).

This year I will also be using Losh, Alexander, Cannon and Cannon's (2014) new book *Understanding Rhetoric: A Graphic Guide to Writing*. The authors explain that students need more than "traditional text-based literacy practices" to understand and learn "the rhetorical requirements of writing for multimodal platforms" (Losh et al. 2014, p. vi); for example blogging, social networks, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, all of which all utilize both textual and visual elements.

To give students some feedback for all of these projects, I use a visual grading rubric I created after reading "Toward New Media Texts: Taking up the Challenge of Visual Literacy" by Cynthia Selfe (2004). She asserts "a designer/viewer evaluation is just as important as a composer/reader evaluation" (p. 78). I created the visual evaluation sheet similar to Selfe's "composer/designer" sheet, only I call it a comic evaluation and use it for the students' comics (p. 81). I often use McCloud's taxonomies to evaluate students' choice of moment, transitions, word/picture combinations, and organization. Most students excel in at least one area, which I believe helps build their confidence.

After the three-panel comic activity, I have students read one of these confidence-building articles such as Lynda Barry's (2008) "Two Questions" from *What It Is* or Neil Gaiman's (2005) introduction from *Year's Best Graphic Novels, Comics & Manga*, where he states "Be proud of your mistakes" (p. 5). I really like using these articles because the emphasis is on trying, not worrying about failing or what other people might think.

Final Thoughts

The three-panel comic activity gets students thinking about and connecting to not just McCloud's taxonomies of clarity, transitions, and word/picture combinations, but also to the rhetorical strategies students need for writing in this class and all their other classes. It also gives those students who have never read comics before a chance to better understand how to read a comic or a graphic novel. By broadening their reading strategies, I am enabling those students who

may be visual, kinesthetic, and multimodal learners struggling with critical reading. And as a fellow instructor stated in an interview for my master's project, "Most students do not see themselves as readers, and a great deal of critical reading needs to be done before writing can happen . . . but looking closely at comics they're developing those skills" (McCombs, 2011, p. 5).

The three-panel comic activity's best quality is that it gets these students thinking about the rhetorical moves of adding detail or thick description to their memory narratives, challenging those read/write learners to be more concise or specific in their writing. Creating a three-panel comic helps all learners become more aware of their writing choices and strategies for longer essay projects. I encourage students to reflect on their experience of creating comics in their final portfolio reflection essay. I receive comments like this:

When I drew my memory it gave me more ideas and helped me expand on my explanation of my memory in my paper. We also drew comics for our third long essay, which was a profile of a person we want to emulate. I liked drawing this one as well. It was fun to pretend to interview someone I admire but will probably never meet. It gave me more ideas that I could add to my paper.

My hope is that this three-panel activity, along with McCloud's taxonomies and the student examples will inspire other instructors to try this activity with their students.

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Appendix A. Comic Taxonomies (Scott McCloud)

Clarity Taxonomy (*Making Comics*)

- Choice of moment
- Choice of frame
- Choice of image
- Choice of word
- Choice of flow

Transitions Taxonomy (*Understanding Comics*)

- Moment-to-moment
- Action-to-action
- Subject-to-subject
- Scene-to-scene
- Aspect-to-aspect
- Non-sequitur

Word/picture Combinations Taxonomy (*Making Comics*)

- Word-specific
- Picture-specific
- Duo-specific
- Intersecting
- Interdependent
- Parallel
- Montage

Pam McCombs is a part-time instructor of first-year writing and children's literature at Eastern Michigan University. She holds a master's in Children's Literature and Written Communication with an emphasis in teaching of writing. She is a grandmother of eight and has introduced all the grandkids to comics, manga, and graphic novels. In her "third chapter" of life she loves seeing the engagement of her students when she has them draw their first comic.