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NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT

Sketchy Evidence: Using Comics to Build Better Arguments

MITCH NOBIS

Frankly, I don't understand why we still so often have to debate the merits of graphic novels. Anything we can say about novels we can say about graphic novels. Sure, some are for kids, some are great, some are lousy, some are strictly for adults, some are about love, some are about beating up bad guys, and, to paraphrase the great comic strip *Bloom County*, too many are about what buxom women would look like in zero gravity.

But, as with "regular" novels, if you seek out the quality work, you will be awed. In her children's books column in the *Wall Street Journal*, Meghan Cox Gurdon recently said, "Love 'em or hate 'em, graphic novels have won a place in the literary firmament" (Saturday, September 21, 2013, C8).

Agreed—and I thank her for pointing out that graphic novels and comics are for adults too—but let's move on from worrying about hating them and get to why many are good, what makes some bad, and how our students can benefit from comics. Dismissing comics is a mistake, and not just because of the well-documented benefits for reluctant and emerging readers. Comics benefit all students, from remedial to advanced and everyone in between, and they offer an easy way to increase the visual literacy of our students.

Writing now is verbal and visual. According to Daniel Pink in *A Whole New Mind* (2006), design schools are

bursting at the seams with forward-thinking enrollees. Think about what you've read in the past 24 hours. How much of it was straight verbal text? No doubt some of it was, but how much included visuals like photos, graphs, or illustrations and even a variety of fonts? Aside from novels, most of what we read—web content, magazines, newspapers, advertisements—has purposefully used elements of visual design. Even the novel shows careful consideration of font selection and size, kerning, and the amount of white space to leave in the margins, and so on.

Everything is designed, including, and especially, comics.

Comics can be used in the classroom in as many ways as traditional text, and language arts teachers can help students enhance their traditional literacy skills while also introducing elements of visual design by inviting students to compose comics. Because any K-12 teacher already has an impossible load of mandates to deal with, we might not be able to add comics to the curricular plate, but we can adapt current assignments to include comics.

This school year, I'm working comics into argumentative writing assignments as a means of introducing visual literacy while also boosting the quality of students' logical arguments. Most of my eleventh-grade Advanced Placement English Language and Composition students' essays looked like solid academic

writing, but their logic was lacking. The arguments relied upon sweeping generalizations and faulty reasoning. Sure, we need to improve comma usage and put more time into the revision and editing work, but we can sweat the details later. First, we need to improve the thinking because as David McCullough put it, "Writing is thinking. To write well is to think clearly. That's why it's so hard" (Cole, 2002).

My students' essays too often showed their haste to get the job done instead of a willingness to engage in the messy process of forming an airtight argument. In an effort to keep the horse before the cart, I wanted to beef up the prewriting stage to help the students with the thinking before the writing.

Show Me the Warrant

Comics could help my students think through the validity of their arguments before they started writing an essay, and students could also explore the rhetorical impact of visual design as well. In a sense, using comics as prewriting serves as a Trojan horse to include elements of visual literacy in an already full curriculum.

But how? I used Nick Kremer's work (2012) to introduce how visual elements can create meaning and influence the reader's interpretation. Because the focus of the lesson was argumentative writing and not visual literacy, we zoomed in on only two concepts from

comics composition: paneling and closure. Paneling is similar to framing in film (Costanzo, 1992) and raises questions for the reader. What is inside the box, or panel, and what is left out? Who or what is the focus of the panel? What is the camera angle and how does it influence the reader's interpretation?

On the other hand, closure can raise so many questions it is difficult to even name them. Closure is essentially how the reader fills in the gaps between panels of a comic. As Scott McCloud put it in *Understanding Comics* (1994), if a comic shows a villain with an axe in one panel and a word balloon of screaming in the next, the reader decides where exactly that axe went. Gruesome, yes, but an effective way to make the point that closure leaves open a world of reader response.

In clear academic prose, though, we usually want to avoid a wide range of interpretations. We want to make our point, to connect the support to the claim. To use comics terms, we want tight gaps that lead the reader from one panel straight to the next with little or room for varied interpretation of the evidence.

In traditional text, this is where my students' essays faltered, and it's why I also turned to Toulmin in addition to comics. For good reason (my students' essays being just one example why), the Common Core puts emphasis on argumentative writing, and many have suggested teachers use the Toulmin model of argumentation to introduce it to students. After reading Smith, Wilhelm, and Fredricksen (2012) and Hillocks (2011), I was on board. I introduced Toulmin's theory of argument to help my students see that argumentation is neither Aristotelian formal exercises nor cable television talking heads screaming at each other. Toulmin's model reveals

how arguments work in everyday life and in writing, and, I hoped, it could help my students form clear, logically supported arguments.

When I combined comics and Toulmin in an effort to boost the students' arguments, the students saw that their warrants were unclear. They were leaving too much up to closure, and they needed to explain to the reader why and how their evidence supported their claims. The comics had allowed students to *see* the gaps in their arguments.

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With some basic terms under our belts and a reminder that a picture is worth a thousand words, we looked at Chris Ware's "Disconnect" (2009). This comic served numerous purposes. It was an introduction to comics for students who were unfamiliar with the form; a mentor text concerning visual elements like layout, paneling, word balloons, closure, narrative boxes, and camera angles; and a reminder of the difference between an academic argument and what we often connotatively think of as an argument (in Ware's comic, a disagreement between spouses).

We used Ware as a model text for how a comic should look and work but not for how an academic argument should be laid out. Though "Disconnect" includes some strong language, a short discussion about context and dialect quickly defused any distractions and positively reinforced how an academic argument uses a formal tone.

Earlier in the term, each student had already brainstormed a variety of claims. Now, they each picked one to develop into a comic, and it was finally time for them to use their pencils for something other than filling in bubble sheets. I asked students to illustrate the argument as a comic strip conversation between a speaker and an audience of one or more people. They were repeatedly assured that this was an English assignment and their art would not be judged. I also gave them one possible structure for their comic:

1. Speaker makes a claim.
2. Audience responds.
3. Speaker provides evidence using narration boxes or word balloons.
4. Audience provides counterargument.
5. Speaker refutes counterargument.
6. Conclusion. Last panel or two ends argument.

The results were an entertaining array of stick figures and data-defending claims that ranged from the need to immediately address climate change to a call to action to stop wearing unattractive Crocs. It was no surprise, though, that their comics repeated a common text-only mistake (which, to be fair, the suggested structure didn't prevent). Most students merely listed the evidence, albeit visually, without going into detail about why or how that evidence proves the claim.

The next step proved crucial. Students shared their comics in small groups and were encouraged to ask questions of each other, but instead of our usual peer feedback, now there was a visual gap between each panel that students could point to and say, "too much closure." They could see where their arguments worked and where they fell apart, where they needed to clearly

state warrants and backing, where they couldn't just leave it up to the reader.

The assignment required the students to include both a speaker and an audience in their comics. This allowed the students to imagine real-world audiences for their claims, and the informal peer publishing of the comics helped them catch where their appeals and evidence worked and where they were lacking. The two levels of audiences (one fictionally and one actually authentic) and the visual nature of comics helped the students troubleshoot their logical support before they even pulled out a piece of lined paper or fired up a computer. In effect, the comics walked them through the difficulty of "thinking clearly," as McCullough put it.

Though students did not have time to develop intricate comics, by using the comics as a form of brainstorming, they did get an introduction to visual design while also vetting their own arguments. That the activity involved persuading two audiences other than the teacher was an unanticipated benefit. At the end of that day, my students were putting more thought into how to support a claim instead of how to just get an assignment done before volleyball practice.

As the year progresses, both our arguments and our study of visual literacy will become more involved. We will work on adding details to support our claims, and the elements of visual rhetoric will be analyzed in advertisements and documentary film in addition to comics. When we do use comics again with Henry David Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience," we will go deeper into how the elements of visual rhetoric create tone, how a camera angle can have the same impact as diction or syntax choices in traditional text, how the details we leave in and leave out influ-

ence the reader's interpretation (Nobis, 2013). The comics medium gives us dozens of possibilities as a stand-alone genre or as a way to enhance students' traditional texts, as we did with our arguments. Comics offer too many benefits to our students to be disrespected in the classroom, so let's get past "love 'em or hate 'em" and move on to "use 'em."

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