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Comic Strips as a Text Structure for Learning to Read

Claudia J. McVicker

Comic strips bring a bright new strategy to reading instruction. This article presents ways classroom teachers can use comics to build strategies to deepen their students' understanding of content using visual literacy skills. Teachers need to recognize the importance of visual literacy for the children of the technology generation. The union of reading and technology on the Internet is causing educators to take a new look at what it means to be literate in today's society (Leu, 2002; Leu & Kinzer, 2000). These new forms of literacy call upon students to know how to read and write in the print world as well as the digital world (Schmar-Dobler, 2003), necessitating the ability to comprehend through visual imagery (Debes, 1969).

Due to the ease and access of information gathering on the Internet, children must have visual literacy skills to comprehend. The World Wide Web is the library of the future, and we must prepare students to understand it, just as we taught them to read books for information in the past. Today's definition of literacy is being broadened to include literacy skills necessary for individuals, groups, and societies to access the best information in the shortest time and to identify and solve the most important problems and then communicate this information (Leu & Kinzer, 2000). This leads to the use of visual literacy for teaching and learning. Visual literacy refers to a group of vision competencies a human being can develop by seeing and, at the same time, having and integrating other sensory experiences.

Developing Visual Literacy Skills in Children With Comics

Comic strips that incorporate text with visual representations offer teachers a great tool for helping children develop their visual literacy skills. Comic strips are a text structure with a story to tell. Just as a story in print requires comprehension by the reader, comics require the reader to blend the print and the graphics to comprehend the intended communication.

To define *visual literacy* in terms of learning to read, teachers often begin with picture books where text and picture cooperate within a narrative synthesis (Giorgis et al., 1999). Because the majority of instructional texts at the elementary level contain various types of pictorial representations, both for motivational and instructional purposes, attention to viewing as a language art has become paramount in today's classrooms. In order to be considered literate, students must be taught to "read" visual images in addition to connected text (Semali, 2003). Comic strips as a text structure provide the perfect vehicle for teaching children reading strategies using visual literacy abilities.

A picture extends the meaning of text for the reader (Piro, 2002). According to Bloom's hierarchy of skills (1984), interpretation or synthesis raises the bar of ability to a higher order thinking skill. As the reader synthesizes how a visual representation cooperates with what is read in the text, new connections extend comprehension. Through this process, readers can attach new information to preexisting schema or create a new schema to fit the situation. As readers view visuals, they confirm or disconfirm how the new information fits into existing schema and a wider knowledge base is formed for future reference. Using visual literacy with visual representation helps to develop better spatial concepts so readers are not forced to imagine details or descriptions in the text such as size, color, or distance. Comic images enhance and extend the text communication. They attract the attention of the reader and create understanding of unknown factors in the text's language. It is clear that visual literacy skills assist literacy development, maintenance, and comprehension of text.

Why Comics?

The International Reading Association (2000) reported that making a difference in the classroom means making teaching different. Comics are one way to make teaching different. They can be used in

elementary classrooms as teaching tools. Comics can have a unique and powerful voice in the classroom by upholding the definition of visual literacy. Comics are a living, daily representation of real life, often representing the world as it changes. Naming them hybrid texts, Hatfield (2000) reconceived these pictorial narrations in our daily newspapers as definite text structures for the literate (those who can read, write, and understand); the illiterate (those who cannot read or write but can view comics and possibly comprehend through the visual representation); and the alliterate (those who can read, write, and understand but choose not to, yet are drawn to comics as an enjoyable brief form of reading). Comic strips have a definitive attraction for all literacy abilities.

Experts Recognize Their Educational Value

Using a comic strip as an alternative text structure for reading alters the child's view of traditional text structures such as narrative texts (storybooks), nonnarrative texts (nonfiction), and poetry. In addition, children who struggle with reading often report that they do not read for pleasure. This can be attributed to the difficulty they experience when they approach the task of reading. Using comics, which are humorous, visual, and limited in text, can alleviate the negative view of reading for some children (McVicker, 2005a). Struggling readers, often unengaged with literacy in general, need a corrective approach to reading intervention—their ability to improve has to be based on building confidence with positive, successful reading experiences (Johns, 2003). Comics help motivate disengaged readers, offering an ingenious hook to reading that can ultimately bridge their literary interests to more conventional text structures.

Using comics for instruction is a quick, concise way to teach, practice, and apply reading skills whether it is for initial instruction (McVicker, 2005b) or remediation of reading difficulties (Johns, 2003). With the assistance of visual literacy skills, the acquisition of sight words and phonics skills and the building of vocabulary and reading comprehension strategies are fostered in developing readers. Hence, teachers have frequently used comics as teaching tools in elementary classrooms (Stainbrook, 2003).

Dorrell, Curtis, and Rampal (1995) reported the use of comics in educational settings for over 75 years in the United States. Typically this has been for the

purpose of motivating young readers to become recreational readers, enabling them to expand their vocabulary knowledge, to engage their imaginations, and to inspire a love of reading (Krashen, 1993). Krashen argued that free voluntary reading is the most effective tool available for increasing a child's ability to read, write, spell, and comprehend, providing compelling supportive evidence through the accumulation of years of research from many different countries.

Easy Access

In light of state budget cuts for education in the United States, comics are readily accessible and free. Acknowledged as public domain, they appear in daily newspapers in millions of homes, cementing a place in the cultural identity. Hundreds of comic strips and visual representations are also archived on official websites like www.garfield.com. The family friendly and often educational *Family Circus* often has common elementary school topics embedded in its daily feature found at www.familycircus.com. The *Peanuts* comic strips with Snoopy, Charlie Brown, and the rest of the gang are also available online at www.unitedmedia.com/comics/peanuts.

Even *Sesame Street*, capitalizing on the preschool child's visual literacy long before the term was coined, has created an interactive learning website <http://www.sesameworkshop.org/sesamestreet> to enhance its television show, videos, books, and teaching materials for assisting teachers and parents with the literacy development of children.

Children Are Entertained While They Learn

Noted cartoonist Jim Davis stated that for 25 years he has been hearing from parents that their kids actually leaned to read thanks to his comic strip *Garfield*. This led him to wonder about the possibilities of having *Garfield* host an educational website for the purpose of learning to read and extending that to other subjects like grammar and vocabulary.

A Website Comprehension Game

Using the comic strips available in the *Garfield* online vault and the online Word Wrestler game at

www.professorgarfield.org/pgf_ReadingRing.html, my education students and I provided the reading content to create a comprehension game for students. We wrote three questions for each strip that appears in the game. These included a literal question; a mystery-word, vocabulary-builder question (Jim Davis reports he consciously places unique, rich language in his strips to add to everyone's vocabulary); and an inferential question so children who play the game can practice using inference skills. Before answering the questions, the reader must first put the mixed-up strip squares into the proper order (sequencing).

Grammar Instruction Made Palatable

Offered as an alternative to the typical grammar text, *Comic-Strip Grammar* (Greenberg, 2000) used a combination of humor and narrative to provide practice on a range of critical grammar topics as specified by national and state language arts standards. Grammar, a tedious topic that has bored generations of students, can be engagingly taught and learned through comics. Consider the interesting ways a verb is exemplified and pictured in comic strips. Or perhaps have students read comics to acquire unique adjectives to enhance their sentences. In fact, most grammar can be taught to children using a comic strip as a visual example to help them comprehend.

Comics As a Motivating Literary Text Structure

Comics are a valid and important text structure. They include the traditional literary discourse triangle: the addresser, the addressee, and the referent (Stainbrook, 2003). In addition, the visual representation of the text provides the reader with a deeper comprehension of the author's intended message through humor. In my classroom experiences, I have found that when my classes and I were able to work humor into our day, the learning load was lightened and the students were motivated to learn.

A Strategy for Teaching Comprehension

Comics often express current events in the editorial pages of newspapers and in the daily strips. Teachers

can spend 10 minutes a day reading a comic strip out loud with the class, modeling how to infer meaning from the brief text and the graphic. Eventually, students can take over each day's reading and discussion of the comic strip. When they become proficient, students may be able to take this skill to text-only works and use it to infer meaning. Inference is an important comprehension skill for students to learn and can be a difficult, abstract skill to teach. Cartoons summarize a thought or event with a few words and visual representation. Cartoons allow the reader to use picture clues (Bromley, 2001) combined with contextual clues to deduct or infer the gag, opinion, or concept. Inference, deduction, and summarization are all important reading skills, which lead to the comprehension of text. The use of comic strips provides a concrete strategy for teaching inference to developing readers.

Walk into almost any classroom and note the cartoon characters used to motivate and educate children of all ages. Cartoons are friends to children before they enter school, so they are already comfortable with them (Edwards & Willis, 2000). Cartoons can be used to enhance and support the learning that goes on in any classroom in versatile and creative ways.

Assisting Struggling Readers

Cartoons make perfect sense in a classroom for reading instruction. They make learning fun and are especially helpful for those children with reading problems or deficiencies because they view it as recreational reading rather than academic reading. Children have a feeling of connection and familiarity with comic characters like Garfield or Big Bird due to exposure before formal schooling. Comics, through the use of visual literacy, can open the door to reading for the challenged student because they offer a visual element for comprehending the text. In some cases, this may offer a turning point for those struggling readers who have lost the hope for success.

A Unique Text for Beginning Readers

Comics offer a virtual springboard to valuable skills for emergent readers and writers who have spatial intelligence (Gardner, 1993). Combining comic strips with the reading strategies such as read-alouds, shared reading, Readers Theatre, and literature circles will contribute to the learning of print concepts like

picture clues, context clues, phonics cues, basic sight words, main-ideas practice, and sequencing skills.

In some cases, the comic strip can illustrate cause and effect, bridging concrete concept to abstract thought. It can also assist in the development of deductive reasoning, evaluative thinking, study skills, prompts for creative writing, and conflict resolution and can instill responsibility, promote listening skills, and assist with reading in cross-curricular learning. Because visuals assist with literacy development, comics can provide teachers with yet another teaching strategy for the classroom (Lapp, Flood, & Fisher, 1999).

Summary

Comic strips can be a valuable text in classroom reading instruction. It is known that visual literacy skills assist students in crucial concept and skill learning on the literacy development continuum. The ever-increasing use of technology in virtually every aspect of life legitimizes visual literacy's place on the list of language arts. Perhaps even more noteworthy is the overall importance of attending to the development of visual literacy in children for their future (Arizpe, 2001). As schools determine mission statements to prepare children for successful integration into society, visual literacy has an important status in that overall undertaking, from early school settings to the graduation of seniors.

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Lesson Link

For a related lesson plan, visit ReadWriteThink.org and click Lessons to find

Gabbing About Garfield: Conversing About Texts With Comic Creator

To submit Teaching Tips, see instructions for authors at www.reading.org. Teaching Tips should be brief, with a single focus on the classroom.