VISUAL NARRATIVES THAT TEACH: THE ROLE OF PRINT AND DIGITAL COMICS AS EDUCATORS

Ġorġ Mallia
University of Malta
MALTA

Abstract

This short paper looks at the nature of comics, how they are natural inducers of affinity in children, and how, as a result, they can be used for teaching and learning. Comics are a hybrid medium made up of visual sequential illustration and a text-based narrative that complements it. In the unique, symbiotic nature of the two interlaced genres, enhanced by other add-ons, comics become a very powerful method of communicating concepts and ideas. This paper examines the nature of comics and how they can be used as pedagogical tools that insidiously communicate.

Introduction

There has never been a satisfactory definition for comics. And the reason is quite simple. Because of the uniqueness of the comics genre and the incredible stylistic versatility of the multitude of comic artists that have enriched the medium with their talents, it makes it very difficult to wholly define it in ways that encompass all that it is. I suppose, for want of something better, we will need to go with one of the first definitions, and one written by the first person to put comics on the academic podium, Will Eisner, the ground-breaking artist who was one of the first to realise just how much could be done with the genre.

In a seminal book on the origins of comics analysis, Eisner (1985) wrote

> 'Comics' deal with two major communicating devices, words and images. Admittedly, this is an arbitrary separation. But since in the modern world of communication they are treated as independent disciplines, it seems valid. Actually, they are derivatives of a single origin, and in the skillful employment of words and images lies the expressive potential of the medium. (p. 13).

Essentially, the harnessing of two distinct art forms in a symbiotic relationship with each other, and utilising a number of conventions, each of which adds to the form, has created a powerful communicating instrument that is, simultaneously, a means of entertainment. As such, comics can also be a popular educational tool. Not simply as a facile way of passing on information, but essentially, and much more productively, as a way for teachers and students to

convey what they think and feel, expressing themselves with this double whammy of communicative methods.

Research by Sousanis (2020), among others, has shown that giving students, even those who did not normally draw, comics-creating exercises, was greatly beneficial. “Through these simple comics-making exercises we’d been doing together, they had been teaching themselves and gained a tremendous wealth of understanding that, I believe, far exceeded what they would’ve attained at this point from readings” (Sousanis, 2020, p. 93).

This is not a one-off, either. The genre lends itself in various ways to pedagogical usage. The most common way is through experimentation with using comics and graphic novels as a way of creating insight into various academic areas. Lan Dong (2013), for example, used them to teach global awareness, and Daniel Ian Rubin (2013), dystopian literature.

This brief paper looks at comics and methods and approaches to the use of comics creation as an entertaining pedagogical tool.

Of Comics and Graphic Novels

Comics tell stories.

That is what they do best. They tell stories of fantastic beings who walk like gods among men, and of little boys who imagine stuffed tigers to be best friends. They speak of war, though hardly ever of peace. They have remapped the Wild West and re-imagined every classic novel that one is likely to find in the nether recesses of any library. They are fantasy, and they are reality. They can be full of humour, or full of the grimmest possible philosophy. Their settings can be a jungle at the beginning of the twentieth century, or an unnamed cityscape in the far-flung future, full of men riding pterodactyls.

Comics tell stories about everything, everyone, everywhere and every time.

I use the word “Comics” on purpose. Think of it as a generic term rather than what it might signify semantically as a word. Because there is nothing comic in Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* (2002) and one would be hard-pressed to laugh at the funny-looking animals that populate Spiegelman’s *Maus* (2003). Though they are etymologically accurate in being referred to as Comics because of their origins, the word became a hold-all that describes the unique genre that has developed in leaps and bounds over the last century and a half.

In any case, each permutation of the name means different things each time. The Graphic Novel is not, in its essential nature, a Comic in format, though it uses the same basic language. Nor is the Comic Strip. Nor, come to that, is the Comic Book. Generic differences become even stronger when the output of

different countries is considered, because each alternative approach makes for a unique ensemble of the same elements. And since we are talking about an art form here, then we must also take into consideration the uniqueness of style that each artist brings into the fold, making labelling a difficult, and at times totally unnecessary, task. It is, in a sense, transmedial narratology (Stein & Thon, 2013), but there are times when it goes even beyond that.

In fact, Comics narrative has as many definitions as it has styles, as indicated above. The very language of Comics permits an enormous number of variations to the way a story is told, though there are a number of clear parameters within which writers and artists must work.

The literature provides us with a few descriptions of the genre that might actually present an idea of what those parameters might be. Here are a few.

Comics and cartoons encyclopaedist Maurice Horne based his own description of the genre on Coulton Waugh's 1947 definition: "The Comics are a form necessarily including the following elements: a narrative told by way of a sequence of pictures, a continuing cast of characters from one sequence to the next, and the inclusion of dialogue and/or text within the picture" (Horne, 1976, p. 47).

And by the father of sequential art, Will Eisner, "The format of the Comic Book presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills. The regimens of art (e.g. Perspective, symmetry, brush stroke) and the regimens of literature (e.g. Grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed upon each other. The reading of the Comic Book is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit" (Eisner, 1985, p. 8).

Finally, a complex one provided by that most diffused of books about Comics, "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer." (McCloud, 1994, p. 9).

Taking the suggestions of all three definitions, we are left with a number of musts: 1) a narrative; 2) pictures/images/art; 3) words/text/literature; 4) sequence; and 5) continuing cast of characters.

In fact, I would add one more must to the list. I agree totally with Wright (2003), who holds "the assumption that most Comic Books succeed or fail on the merits of their storytelling" (p. xvii). So my number 6) would be storytelling.

The very nature of graphic storytelling permits diversity. In much the same way that an artist has a personal aesthetic, and a writer can adopt a particular style, the image-text combo that is a graphic narrative takes both on board. The

resultant uniqueness produced by each creator, or creator-team, has paved the multi-textured and vari-coloured quilt that are Comic Strips, Comic Books, and Graphic Novels since the inception of the genre.

The language of Comics permits this. It actually has a lot of similarities with the language we use every day with its functional and content words (Saraceni, 2003), tying in with the Comics' functional and content components. They are, of course, fused together in ways that make the analysis of one separate from the other quite difficult, and the separation for analytical purposes has been a major red herring to those who have tried, because the critical terminology used is taken from the component genres, ignoring the fact that the compound creates a demand for a dedicated critical vocabulary.

This does not mean there cannot be a dissection for critical analysis. It means that the dissected elements need to be examined from what is totally a graphic narrative-based critical stance. "The graphic elements of Comics art are woven together to create the warp and woof of the medium's visual nature" (Harvey, 1996, p. 9). Harvey does go on to distinguish between four distinct graphic threads: (1) Narrative breakdown; (2) composition; (3) layout; and (4) style. Saying that, in the end, "the visual tapestry always emerges whole" (p. 9).

But in the end, there has to be fusion. As Carrier (2000) writes, referring to Winsor McCay's work, in reply to his own question as to how do sequences constitute a narrative sequence and not just a sequence of images:

> What is required is the self-evident presentation of the images as connected, as forming a causal sequence. Difficult as it may be to specify necessary and sufficient conditions for success in this synthesis, everyone is aware of what happens when such narratives "work" or fail. (p. 56)

The connection is in the main implicative. "Comics tell a story both on different levels of the pictures and different levels of time. Hence, something also happens between the pictures, and the consumer is called upon to discover the development of actions within the individual picture." (Silbermann, 1986, p. 21). Pacing and time are essential characteristics of the narrative, both as portrayed in the panels, and as implied by the gutters that link in almost gestalt fashion and provide the full continuity for the reader.

Comics, Children, Teaching and Learning

So how do comics tell stories to children, so that in turn, children can tell stories with comics? Comics were not originally intended for children.

"The idea that comics were for children was really an idea that took hold in the middle of the twentieth century. Before that,using words and pictures together

to tell a story sequentially was a good way to reach just about anyone who could read" (Sanders, 2016). It was at that time, however, that the very nature of the medium, with images helping slow readers, and good readers getting the full package, seeing illustration endorse the words they read, that comics developed into what became primarily a children's market. This was to change some time in the last decade of the nineties, when comics were reclaimed by adults … or, to explain it better, those adults that grew out of the comics-loving children.

Of course, this varies across countries, and I do believe that even before comics were specifically made with children in mind, comics must have been read by youngsters. Still, in the States, when the modern comic book format was developed by Max Gaines in 1933, with his Funnies on Parade (Rhoades, 2008), there seems to be consensus that that is when children became the main readers of the genre. In the UK, the Dundee-based company DC Thomson had its stable of juvenile comics, including what was to become their flagship title, *The Dandy*, which was first published in 1937. They did not invent the British children's comic, but "it is surely no exaggeration to say that Dandy and Beano revolutionized the world of British children's comics, including full-colour covers and anthropomorphic characters" (Chapman, 2011, p.31). Preceding all of this, and in a way hinting at the road ahead, the Italian *Il Giornalino della Domenica*, that from the start ran comics-like stories, started publication in 1906 (Gallo, 2008). *Il Corriere dei Piccoli*, which began publication in 1908, followed suit (Castaldi, 2017).

In spite of a drop in sales of comics aimed at children, explainable because of the multiple types of entertainment available to youngsters, there can be no doubt that children have an affinity with the genre, both in its printed and its fledgling online form.

Philip Nel (2020) makes an excellent case as to why comics are so important within children's maturing and educational processes:

> Comics for young readers merit our attention. As works read by people who are still very much in the process of becoming, children's comics have the potential to be among the most influential books in a young person's life. These comics give children some of their earliest aesthetic experiences. They introduce small humans to art, language, graphic design, and ideas. Finally, even though comics have found their way into educational institutions, they are still as likely to be found in children's bedrooms as in classrooms; the advantage is that comics are still books that children can choose to read themselves." (p. 135)

With that as the base on which to build the reasoning why comics should be integrated into the curriculum, both, potentially, for mainstream teaching (with books like Elder's *Reading with Pictures* (2014), and others like it making life easier) and for special projects, like the MIRACLE project's utilisation of enhanced comics as a bridge to knowledge about climate change (coMics and IllustRations Augmented to tackle CLimate change in primary Education (MIRACLE), 2025). Comic creation was also at the core of the CLIMATOPIA project, in which a fantasy story gave rise to diverse discussions on climate awareness (Varonis et al., 2024). All that is left is the question "how" – because innovation definitely needs to be at play in cases like these.

Comics scholar Charles Hatfield (2005) pointed at the 1970s as the years in which there was a turning point in comics being accepted as instructional tools in American elementary and secondary schools. Up to today, there are programmes throughout the States that use comics in different areas of teaching and learning (Tilley & Weiner, 2017).

Studies have clearly shown how useful comics are for this purpose. As far back as 2007, Mallia proved that comics are not just enticers to motivation. That is to say, they are not just instruments for the affective domain, but can be considered to affect cognition, in much the same way that reading does. (Mallia, 2007).

Although comics have not drawn an enormous amount of attention from academia, there have been a number of academic analysts, or at least serious thinkers, who have striven to define the mechanics of the genre. Duncan and Smith (2009) list a total of twenty-eight milestones in the development of comic art studies, beginning with Frederick Coulton Waugh's The Comics from 1947, and ending with the University of Florida's launching of the first online refereed academic journal about comics, *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies* in 2004. This does not mean that there were no other publications other than those mentioned by Duncan and Smith during the fifty-seven years in the compendium, but the fact that only twenty-eight instances of scholarship are mentioned as standing out is indicative of the dearth of in-depth analyses of the genre. The fact that many of the works mentioned by Duncan and Smith are actually histories of the development of comics and not works that actually try to understand the workings of comics continues to emphasise this.

Still, research is ongoing, even in the universities. According to Tilley & Weiner, "Recent dissertations have studied diverse issues such as comics as literacy tools for community college students (Burke 2012), the suitability of comics as texts in high school social studies classrooms (Boerman-Cornell 2012), the impact of comics on middle-grade students' reading motivation (Edwards 2008), and the pedagogy of comics production with young children (Stoermer 2009)."

Conclusions

Comics are a medium that is diverse, rich, and amenable to educational practice. The multifaceted nature of the genre is conducive to a large number of permutations when it comes to both curriculum and project inclusion. The fact that it is essentially an entertainment medium, helping create a motivational reason for its presence (in and out of the classroom), is value added and can be described as a way to get to the end result – i.e. a non-classroom route to classroom inclusion.

Comics can be used as pedagogical tools that can inform and be created by students to inform and analyse personal understanding of a theme. They can be both print and online; in the second case, also open to enhancement, helping create a game-like context that helps student interactivity and motivational thrust.

But, in essence, it is the very nature of the genre that entices, allures, and draws students to it, making them open to the understanding of what is being communicated, or, in the case of their own creation of comics, what and how they would like to communicate it.

References

Boerman-Cornell, W. (2012). *Learning to See History: A Content Analysis of the Affordances of Graphic Novels for High School Teaching* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Illinois at Chicago.

Burke, B. P. (2012). *Using comic books and graphic novels to improve and facilitate community college students' literacy development* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

Carrier, D. (2000). *The aesthetics of comics.* The Pennsylvania State University Press.

Castaldi, S. (2017). A brief history of comics in Italy and Spain. In F. Bramlett, R. T. Cook, & A. Meskin (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to comics* (pp. 79-87). Routledge.

Chapman, J. (2011). *British comics: A cultural history.* Reaktion Books.

Dong, L. (2013). Beyond borders: Teaching global awareness through the graphic novel. In C. K. Syma & R. G. Weiner (Eds.), *Graphic novels and comics in the classroom (*pp. 220-232). McFarland & Company, Inc.

Duncan, R., & Smith, M. J. (2009). *The power of comics: History, form & culture.* Continuum.

Edwards, B. (2008). *Motivation and middle school readers: Graphic novels, comic Books, and free voluntary reading time* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Oklahoma.

Eisner, W. (1985). *Comics & sequential art* (21st printing, 2001). Poorhouse Press.

Elder, J. (2013). *Reading with pictures.* Andrews McMeel Publishing.

Gallo, C. (2008). Vamba e i ragazzi del "Giornalino della Domenica" a Fiume. *In Atti della Accademia Roveretana degli Agiati. A, Classe di scienze umane, lettere ed arti, 8*(1)*,* 293-320.

Harvey, R. C. (1996). *The art of the comic book: An aesthetic history.* University Press of Mississippi.

Hatfield, C. (2005) *Alternative comics: An emerging literature*. University Press of Mississippi.

Horne, M. (Ed.) (1976). *The world encyclopaedia of comics.* Avon

Mallia, G. (2007). Learning from the sequence: The use of comics in instruction. *ImageText*, *3*(3) 104-114. https://imagetextjournal.com/learning-from-the-sequence-the-use-of-comics-in-instruction/

McCloud, S. (1994). *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art.* Harper.

Miller, F. (2002). *Batman: The dark knight returns*. DC Comics.

MIRACLE (2025). *Miracle project*. https://project-miracle.eu/index.php/en/

Nel, P. (2020). Children and comics. In C. Hatfield & B. Beaty (Eds.), *Comics studies: A guidebook (*pp. 126-137). Rutgers University Press.

Rhoades, S. (2008). *A complete history of American comic books.* Peter Lang.

Rubin, D. I. (2013). "Remember, remember the fifth of November": Using graphic novels to teach dystopian literature. In C. K. Syma & R. G. Weiner (Eds.), *Graphic novels and comics in the classroom (*pp. 84-90). McFarland & Company, Inc.

Sanders, J. S. (2016). How comics became kids' stuff. In M. A. Abate & J. S. Sanders (Eds.), *Good grief! Children and comics (*pp. 9-28). Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum.

Saraceni, M. (2003). *The language of comics.* Routledge.

Silbermann, A. (1986). The way toward visual culture: Comics and comic films. In A. Silbermann & D-D. Dyroff (Eds.), *Comics and visual culture: Research studies in ten countries (*pp. 11-27). K.G. Saur.

Sousanis, N. (2020). Thinking in comics: All hands-on in the classroom. In S. E. Kirtley, A Garcia, & P. E. Carlson (Eds.), *With great power comes great pedagogy: Teaching, learning, and comics* (pp. 92-116). University Press of Mississippi.

Spiegelman, A. (2003). The complete maus: A survivor's tale. Pantheon Books.

Stein, D., & Thon, J.-N., eds. (2013). *From comic strips to graphic novels: Contributions to the theory and history of graphic narrative.* De Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110427660

Stoermer, M. (2009) *Teaching between the frames: Making comics with seven and eight year old children, a search for craft and pedagogy* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Indiana University.

Tilley, C. L., & Weiner, R. G. (2017). Teaching and learning with comics. In F. Bramlett, R. T. Cook, & A. Meskin (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to comics* (pp. 358-366). Routledge.

University of Florida Department of English. (2004). *ImageText*. https://imagetextjournal.com/

Varonis, O., Varonis, E. M., Pyrini, A., & Ioannides, C. Climatopia: Self-directed learning to improve quality of life. In E. M. Varonis and A. Pyrini, (Eds.), *Communication technologies in education: Proceedings of ICICTE 2023* (pp. 77-94). http://www.icicte.org/assets/08-icicte2023%e2%80%93proceedings%e2%80%93varonis.pdf

Waugh, C. (1947). *The comics.* Macmillan.

Wright, B. W. (2001). *Comic book nation: The transformation of youth culture in America.* John Hopkins University Press.

Author Details

Ġorġ Mallia
University of Malta
Malta
Gorg.mallia@um.edu.mt