

Reuniting Visual and Verbal: Integrating Comics for Expansive Thinking Across the Curriculum

In 2010, the *New York Times* reported a significant decline in the sale of children's picture books. While acknowledging the role that the economic downturn and digital alternatives played, the article attributed the primary cause to the current culture in educational policy: "Parents have begun pressing their kindergartners and first graders to leave the picture book behind and move on to more text-heavy chapter books. Publishers cite pressures from parents who are mindful of increasingly rigorous standardized testing in schools" (Bosman, 2010). This points to the wide reaching effect of standardized assessment, quite literally narrowing students' ways of seeing, thereby constraining their ways of thinking. To argue against an over-emphasis on standards is not to imply that basic levels of literacy, competency, and knowledge are not essential; it sacrifices a nimbleness of mind for an educational system ordered around a limited notion of intelligence. Verbal thought, as Vygotsky (1986) noted, "does not by any means include all forms of thought" (p. 88). From the *Times* article: "Many parents overlook the fact that chapter books, even though they have more text, full paragraphs and fewer pictures, are not necessarily more complex." Policy perpetuates this simplistic view, which overlooks that ignores the richness of the visual and the dynamic potential in uniting visual and verbal. Rudolf Arnheim (1997, 1969) sought to reconnect thinking and seeing, arguing that perception is not something separate – mere decoration – but integral to our making of meaning. Over-privileging the verbal as the sole path to serious, rational thought – much like describing the weather using only a thermometer – limits the possibilities for our understanding and making meaning. Images are able to convey aspects of experience otherwise inarticulable in language. Access to multiple channels opens us to discovering new ways of being.

As an alternative to the one-sidedness testing emphasizes, this paper seeks to show the value of incorporating into education curricula a medium that neatly straddles and integrates both the visual and verbal: the comic book. After a long uphill battle for legitimacy, comics are now enjoying a new elevated status as serious literary works. Prominent examples include Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer prize-winning *Maus*; Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen*, the sole comic book on Time Magazine's 2005 list of "ALL-TIME 100 greatest novels"; and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, a 2006 finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Comics are well-established and increasingly being introduced into classrooms as a means of literacy education. The Comic Book Project, a literacy curriculum initiative founded by Michael Bitz, has been adopted and spread into schools across the nation, with much success in raising student engagement, participation, and effective experiential learning (Bitz, 2010). Recognizing comics' potential and how well their students respond to visual learning, a growing number of teachers are implementing comics into their individual classrooms and are finding support in the form of an increasing body of resources devoted to exploring the medium. (For examples see: <http://mcpopmb.ning.com/group/graphicnovelscomics>.) Comics have also shown great promise in transcending literacy barriers. The World Comics project based in Finland calls comics a, "low tech communication medium" that anyone can create and share to impact their community. In India and other developing regions, the organization provides training and resources to help local people create their own "grassroots" comics to address local situations from natural disasters to health crises (<http://www.worldcomics.fi/>).

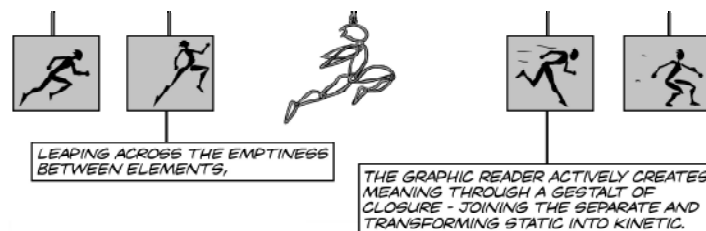
On their literary and literacy merits alone, comics have demonstrated their worthwhileness for inclusion in educational settings. But they have much more to offer than training wheels for "real" literacy – they are an essential medium in their own right ripe with potential for exploration in academia. Comics' fusion of visual and verbal make them a complex site for engagement, capable of tremendous depth of expression. In the way that they can convey numerous layers of meaning by combining multiple modes, comics possess a wholeness about them and are a natural fit for doing interdisciplinary work, holding the promise and power of expanding our seeing and hence our thinking. The following examination of how they function and exploration of their unique properties, lays the groundwork for

conceiving comics' immersion within a broader educational context. (Artworks shown © their respective creators/publishers, reproduced here under academic fair use. Additional comics samples from the author's own in-progress doctoral dissertation as comic.)



From *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud

Scott McCloud, in his groundbreaking 1993 comic on comics *Understanding Comics*, provides a broadly encompassing definition of comics: “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (p. 9). Comics are composed of individual fragments – these include the separate panels (“frames” that contain the images), word or dialogue balloons (emanating from a speaker), and text boxes (narrative voiceovers). The negative space between panels is termed the “gutters,” and it is here that McCloud suggests comics derive their lifeblood, for, “In the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea” (p. 66). The graphic reader constructs meaning and a cohesive narrative from the static, juxtaposed panels through a gestalt-like act of closure – what McCloud defines as “observing the parts but perceiving the whole,” (p. 63). Comics are thus an active, participatory experience for the reader, an essential quality of the medium as the reflections of the Italian writer Italo Calvino illustrate. Calvino credits looking at translated American comic strips before he learned to read as being instrumental in opening his mind to imagination, this “*thinking* in terms of images. ... I could easily dispense with the words – the pictures were enough. ... in my mind I told myself the stories, interpreting the scenes in different ways” (p. 93). Even after he was reading, he recounts, “I preferred to ignore the written lines and to continue with my favorite occupation of daydreaming *within* the pictures and their sequence” (p. 94). The participatory nature of comics is further compounded by the simplified (but not simplistic) drawing styles employed, which allow the reader to live within and inhabit the characters on the page.



From the author's "The Shape of Our Thoughts"

Comics possess a dual nature. We read individual panels in sequential fashion like text, but we also take in the composition of the whole page all-at-once, much as we would a painting. This “all-at-onceness” – or simultaneity – speaks to our ability to see the whole and the parts at the same time. Time in comics (quite unlike film), transpires in space. Hillary Chute (2009) observes Spiegelman’s integration of past and present in *Maus* through this spatiality of the comics page, “He thus represents the accreted, shifting ‘layers’ of historical apprehension not only through language but also through the literal, spatial layering of comics, enabling the presence of the past to become radically legible on the page” (p. 351). Time-encoded yet timeless, fragmented yet seamless, the comics page is a singular place that makes possible the side-by-side cohabitation of multiple threads and frames of reference – allowing them to interact and speak together across time and space. Sequential and simultaneous, comics offer a unique synthesis of the verbal and the visual.



Layers of Time Juxtaposed in Spiegelman’s “Maus”

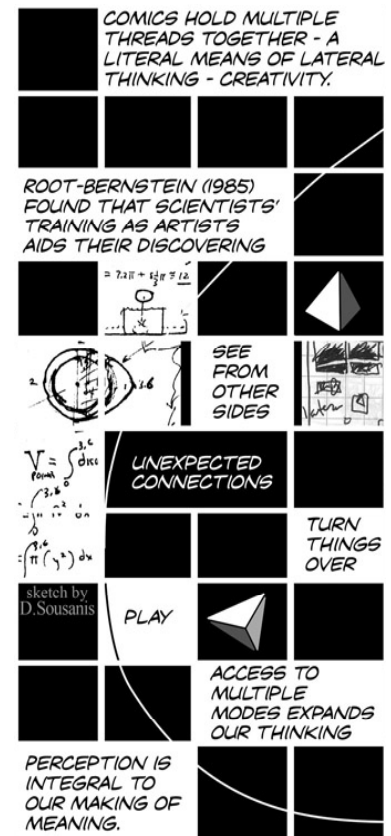
New comics readers often ask, “Which should I read first: words or pictures?” There is no correct way, as it is a cyclical process, a back and forth, with each informing the other. Comics theorist R.C. Harvey (1979) insists that comics depend on the blending of both visual and verbal in which “neither words nor pictures are quite satisfactory without the other” (p. 641). This dynamic relationship between



words and pictures in comics exemplifies Gunther Kress’s (2001) notion of multimodality, where meaning resides in multiple modes contributing ensemble to the whole (p. 1). Their interaction creates a kind of resonance, where each enriches and brings greater complexity of meaning to the other, reinforcing and growing not in additive fashion but rather multiplicative. Lewis (2001) sees the interweaving of picture and text as interanimating one another, essentially creating what he describes as an ecosystem of interdependencies between the different elements. On the comics page, the resonance and interplay between word and image results in the emergence of something beyond what either can do alone. As Kress contends, rather than

gesture, image, and action being illustrative supports of the “real” thing – the linguistic – he argues for a de-privileging of language, where, “whether as speech or as writing, [language] is only ever a partial means for carrying meaning” (p. 142). Comics, in their incorporation of the visual not as illustration but as truly integral and integrated, offer a challenge to the verbal’s role as the dominant path to serious, rational thought. Touted as a new media, comics really represent a continuation of a lineage stemming from stories told on cave walls to grand tapestries – all from a time before the rift between image and text grew so wide.

Langer (1957) cites Bertrand Russell as regretting “we cannot construct a language which would express all relations by analogous relations; then we would not be tempted to misconstrue language” (p. 81). But perhaps with comics, a language of juxtaposition and an art of fragments, we can have the best of both worlds and achieve a wholeness of expression, well-suited to capture the richness and complexity of our thinking. What is the shape of our thoughts within our heads? A linear string of symbols? Doubtful. More likely, it is a fluid collection of images and words, a series of fragmented parts from which – much as McCloud defined comics – we juxtapose, construct connections, and derive meaning. Comics’ ability to present information in both sequential, linear fashion, as well as simultaneous, non-linear complexity, means that they can handle the nested, tangential, and often parenthetical nature of our thinking, enabling unique interwoven storytelling possibilities. In their capacity for intersecting multiple perspectives, this language of juxtapositions (a literal means of lateral thinking), facilitates the making of unexpected connections, exemplifying Max Ernst’s (Ghiselin, 1952) definition of creativity: “The pairing of two realities which apparently cannot be paired on a plane apparently not suited to them” (p. 66). Comics are thus a fertile site for play and imagination, laden with potential for creative discoveries. Robert Root-Bernstein (1985) found that scientists’ training as artists helped in their process of discovering. Having access to alternative means of seeing allowed those individuals to look at problems and make connections in ways their more narrowly educated peers limited to a single mode of thinking could not. Root-Bernstein extrapolates a need for an emphasis on visual and other nonverbal forms of thinking, and that “exclusive educational stress upon verbal and mathematical skills drastically limits the types of problems that students can raise and solve” (p. 64). Armed with multiple ways of seeing, barriers tumble and our creative possibilities flourish.



Educating for the arts, comics, and visual thinking more broadly, is not simply a matter of culture or aesthetics, but essential as a means of enabling multi-dimensional sight. People are not standard and interchangeable. We are more than efficient machines for crunching data. A narrow focus on standards and limited modes of thinking are a set of blinders. In exploring through the visual *and* the verbal, in ways comics make possible, we open ourselves to discoveries and expand our capacity to make meaning beyond what we could have while remaining solely tied to a single mode. Several months after their initial story on the decline of picture books, the *New York Times* published a response from a teacher-librarian at an elementary school in California accompanied by a giant scroll of students’ art. That first article had touched off a month-long school-wide picture book reading project, summed up with this statement: “We believe that picture books are essential to the development of lifelong readers and learners” (Sundstrom, 2011). To cultivate creative thinkers, we need to embrace the importance of the arts, of other modes of seeing as being integral and essential to who we are and who we can become.

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Appendix: From the author's "Learning Pathways"

