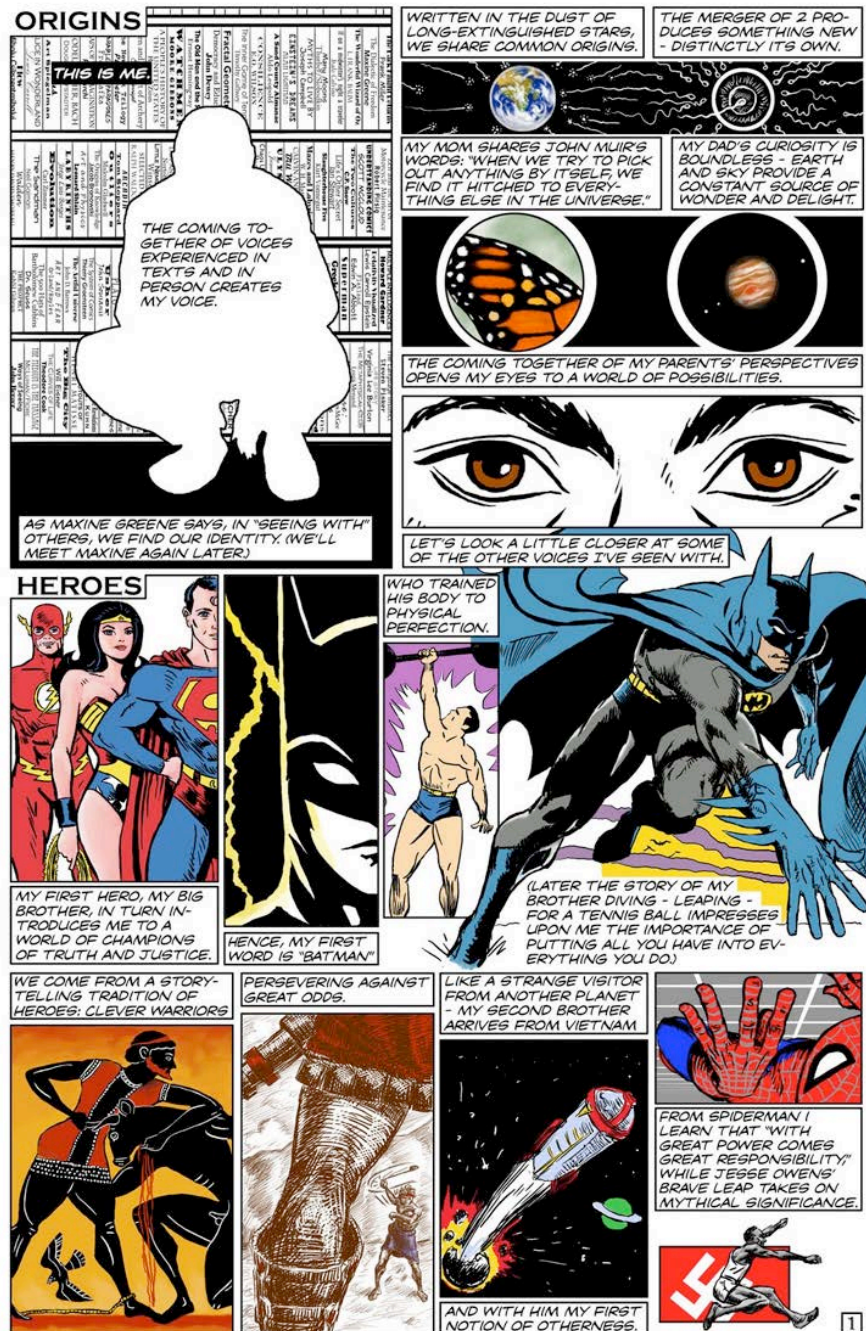


## Comics – Expanding Narrative Possibilities, integrating into the classroom

Nick Sousanis (Original version presented as a slide lecture at Teachers College July 13, 2011)

More resources at [www.comicsclassroom.wikispaces.com](http://www.comicsclassroom.wikispaces.com), contact [nsousanis@gmail.com](mailto:nsousanis@gmail.com)

For me, comics, in their capacity to incorporate and integrate the visual equally alongside the verbal, facilitate and offer the capacity for more whole ways of expression and representation. They are a great gateway to literacy – though they offer much more than that. This was my personal experience as a child with a much older brother who got me reading his comics, and that simultaneously hastened my reading of more straight up texts:



From "Bi(bli)ography" by Sousanis, all author comics at [www.spinweaveandcut.com](http://www.spinweaveandcut.com)

The Italian writer Italo 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). Calvino’s comments not only point to the literacy aspects of reading comics, but to the participatory nature of the medium, as we’ll see in a bit.

I see comics as an accessible vehicle for deep **explanation**, but more, integrated **visual-verbal** in an **equal** and **whole** way, that offer a wholeness about them. Yes, they can be a **gateway** to **literacy** but something **much more**... 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.

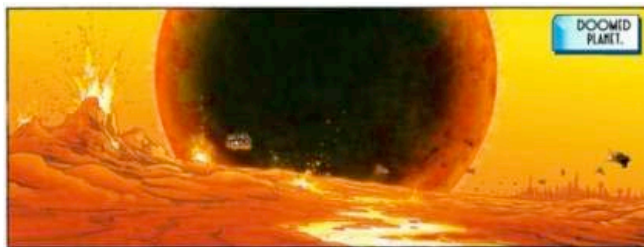


	oracle bone jiaguwen	greater seal dazhuan	lesser seal xiaozhuan	clerkly script lishu	standard script kaishu	running script xingshu	cursive script caoshu	modern simplified jiantizi
rén (*nin) human	人	人	人	人	人	人	人	人
nǚ (*nraʔ) woman	女	女	女	女	女	女	女	女
ěr (*nhaʔ) ear	耳	耳	耳	耳	耳	耳	耳	耳
mǎ (*mrāʔ) horse	馬	馬	馬	馬	馬	馬	馬	马
yú (*ŋha) fish	魚	魚	魚	魚	魚	魚	魚	鱼
shān (*srān) mountain	山	山	山	山	山	山	山	山
rì (*nit) sun	日	日	日	日	日	日	日	日
yuè (*ŋot) moon	月	月	月	月	月	月	月	月
yǔ (*whaʔ) rain	雨	雨	雨	雨	雨	雨	雨	雨
yún (*wan) cloud	云	云	云	云	云	云	云	云





*Lascaux cave drawing, Egyptian Hieroglyphics, Chinese pictograms, and Bayeux tapestry ... and Superman (below), by Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely*



Comics are gaining acceptance – but why did it take so long? The name and its origins didn't help, and they came into being simultaneously with superhero **genre** – and thus **a medium was wrapped up in a genre** (i.e. what if all FILMS were WESTERNS?)



**What made this current MOMENT possible?** 1978 **Will Eisner's** *A Contract with God*, cemented the term “graphic novel” as being associated with a medium somehow more acceptable than, although indistinguishable (except in length) from comic books. 1986 a trifecta of major works released to widespread acclaim and recognition highlighting the grown up side of comics: **Frank Miller's** genre-transcending take on Batman *The Dark Knight Returns*, the first collected installment of **Art Spiegelman's** Pulitzer prize-winning *Maus*, and **Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's** *Watchmen*, the only graphic novel on Time Magazine's 2005 list of “ALL-TIME 100 greatest novels.” In 1993 **Scott McCloud's** *Understanding Comics* – a comic on comics – opened the doors wide for legitimate discourse about the medium and what it might take on within its pages.







What comics are and how they work: McCloud's definition from *Understanding Comics* (1993): **"Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer"** (p. 9).

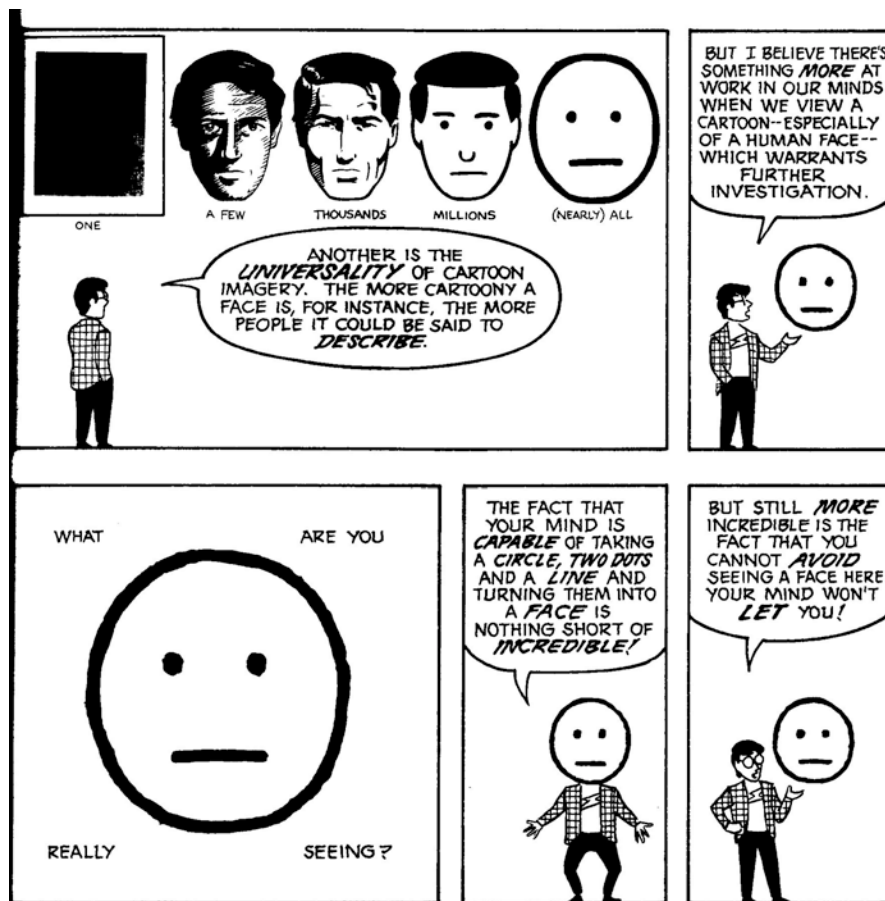
Comics are composed of individual fragments – these include the separate panels ("frames" that contain the images), word or dialogue balloons (emanating from a speaker), and text boxes (narrative voiceovers). KEY: **YOU hold FRAGMENTS together!** The negative space between panels is termed the "gutters," 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.



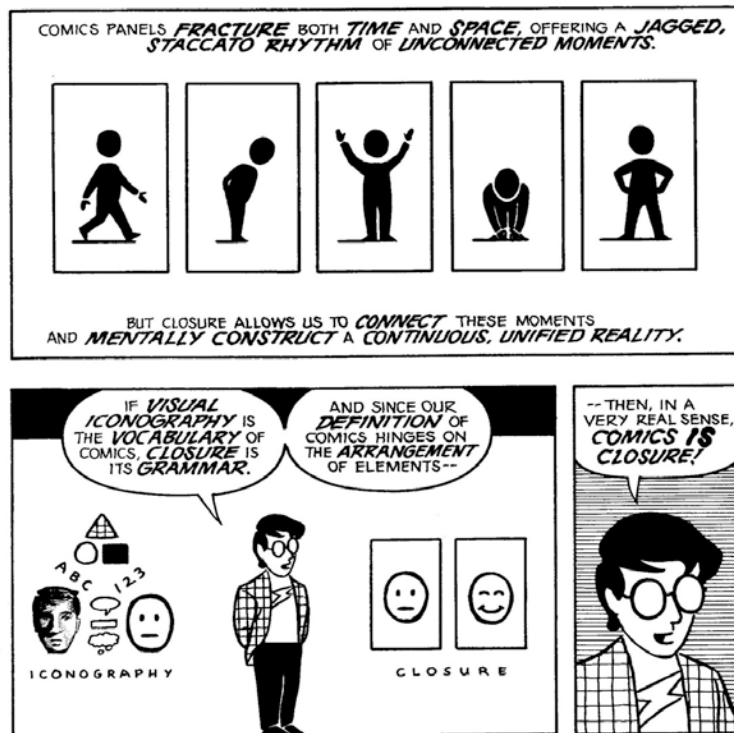
66

The participatory nature of comics is further compounded by the simplified (but not simplistic) drawing styles employed, which allow the reader to live within & inhabit characters on the page.



31

McCloud identifies SIX types of Panel to Panel Transitions (Abel&Madden suggest a seventh). These are akin to GRAMMAR of comics, and we can find similar transitions (Cuts) in FILM.



67

*McCloud on Closure and the six transitions*



Comics are **Sequential** like TEXT, BUT ALSO **Simultaneous** – Like ART!

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). Sequential and simultaneous, comics offer a unique synthesis of the verbal and the visual.





*Layers of Time Juxtaposed in Spiegelman's "Maus"*



*Simultaneity meta-textually represented in Moore and Gibbon's "Watchmen" (The center text – "There is no future. There is no past. Do you see?" – directly references the fact that we can see the panels before and after the one the character is "speaking" in – simultaneity – as the next panel also speaks to.)*

Comics thus have the capacity for interweaving multiple threads and juxtaposing stories together. Using the composition of the page and VISUAL CUES to keep the different levels of story distinct – yet cohesive.



Together, writer Moore and artist Gibbons are particularly masterful at keeping readers firmly grounded in the multiple narratives that they string together. This layering of experience can work to great effect even within a single panel as evidenced in this example from *Watchmen*. Here, a “fictional” comic narrative is juxtaposed within the main narrative. The text near the top of the panel comes from a pirate comic being read by a character in the main narrative. Not only do dialogue and imagery parallel the main story but events and themes also overlap. The utilization of the parchment-looking caption provides all we need to know about its source even absent its context. The background image (as subsequent panels reveal) is a fallout shelter sign affixed to a newsvendor’s stand (who is speaking in the word balloon), but it doubles as the “black sails against the yellow indies sky”. Signs of war, literally and figuratively, are on both narratives’ horizons. Text and image from both stories resonate with one another while the visual cues allow us to keep them separate and connected, distinct yet still whole.

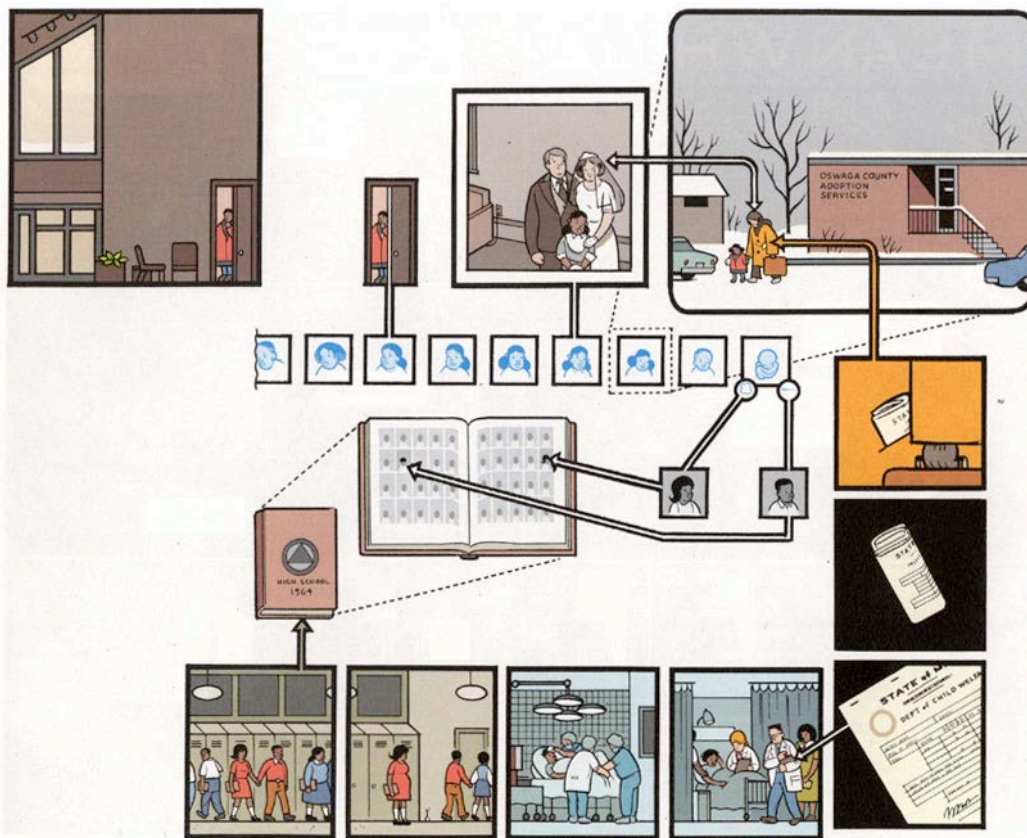


Let us look at a full page example from *Watchmen* of intercutting multiple narratives that demonstrates how well comics can maintain a cohesive structure despite fragmented stories. In panel one, the dialogue reads, “the big stuff looks smaller somehow.” The perspective from which the room is depicted echoes the text. Panel two reads: “In the end you just wash your hands of it and shut it away,” alongside an image from the second setting, in which rain is washing paint onto and off of the hands of the man carrying the “The End Is Nigh” sign. In panel three the older woman asks, “You want I should go be a nun?” as she pulls her nightgown closed, revealing very un-nun-like cleavage, demonstrating the potential in



comics for irony between the juxtaposition of words and images. We're back in the rain again in panel four as the dialogue reads "Life goes on" juxtaposed ironically next to the man holding the sign. Tight braiding between image and text holds single panels and multiple narratives together.

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.



*From Chris Ware's Jimmy Corrigan – demonstrating tangential paths*

Within panel – **which do we read first**: text or image? There is no correct way, it's a cyclical process, a back and forth, with each informing the other. 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.

This **resonance** between image and text can make for a deceptively dense packing of information within a small space, which is further compounded upon through comics’ capacity for metaphor in both modes. *Watchmen* offers examples of such metaphorical density – in each panel art and script are tightly bound together to create something always greater than the sum of their parts. An example from the opening page: “They could have followed in the footsteps of good men, like my father or president Truman.” The image depicts the narrator walking through the pool of blood, leaving behind bloody footsteps. In the story, nuclear war is again on the horizon, perhaps suggesting a following in the footsteps of Truman, and we later learn our narrator’s father was entirely absent and someone he never knew. By itself, the picture records a scene, the text on its own tells a bit of information, but together meanings multiply and the contrast between what is said and what is seen in this instance, create rich possibilities for irony and further depth and complexity of meaning.



**BACK TO WHOLENESS:** Comics’ fusion of the visual and verbal speaks to Rudolph Arnheim’s (1997, 1969) project to reconnect thinking and seeing. From this stance, perception is not something separate – mere decoration – but integral to our making of meaning. As Kress contends, rather than gesture, image, and action being illustrative supports of the “real” thing – the linguistic (p. 42) – 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). By over-privileging the verbal as the sole path to serious, rational thought – much like talking about the weather using only a thermometer – restricting ourselves to a single mode limits the possibilities for our understanding and making of meaning. Susanne K. Langer (1957), (2009, 1962) argues that images are able to convey aspects of experience that are otherwise inarticulable in language. Are feelings and emotions irrational or merely hard to put into words? Side by side as equal partners on the comics page, images and text together resist this narrow, flattening of expression, and carry more meaning through multiple channels. In holding these multiple modes together, comics hold the **promise and power of expanding our seeing and hence our thinking**, thereby opening other routes to re-presenting in kaleidoscopic, multi-faceted depths.



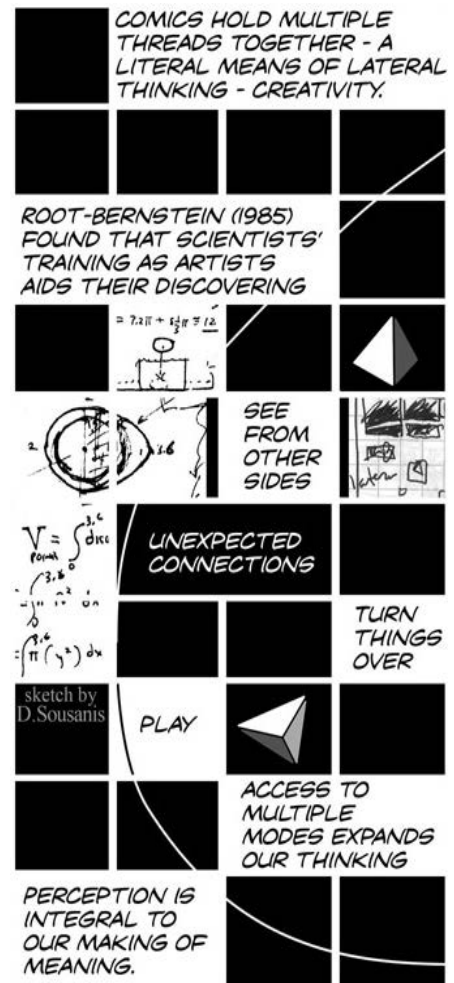
## **FACILITATE Creativity – SEE IN MULTIPLE WAYS:**

This language of juxtapositions that is comics facilitates the making of unexpected connections. In this way, comics – compositions of images and text in space – become a site of play and imagination, laden with potential for creative discoveries and new perspectives in the process of making them. I see this with each piece in my own practice, in which starting from some initial inkling of an idea, the unanticipated emerges out of feedback between the elements I bring together and constraints of the form. The very **process of engaging with visual and verbal elements provides me pathways to new possibilities.** Whatever the strength of our drawing skills, if we consider drawing as a way of thinking, in exploring through the visual, we may come upon discoveries, make connections we could not have otherwise uncovered while remaining solely tied to the verbal. **Robert Root-Bernstein** (1985) found exactly this in his analysis of prominent scientific discoverers – it seems that their training as artists was prominent in their discovering. 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.

## **WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT FOR ED:**

**PEOPLE AREN'T ONE WAY.** Comics are an interdisciplinary, multi-modal medium, a language of juxtapositions and an art of fragments – capable of opening new pathways, possibilities, channels... 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. 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. 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.

**Literacy:** Comics have 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 World Comics: <http://www.worldcomics.fi/>, Grassroots Comics. Of course, see the work of the Comic Book Project, started at Teachers College: <http://www.comicbookproject.org/>, and see Michael Bitz’s “From Commas to Kryptonite: Lessons from the Comic Book Project – great for teachers,



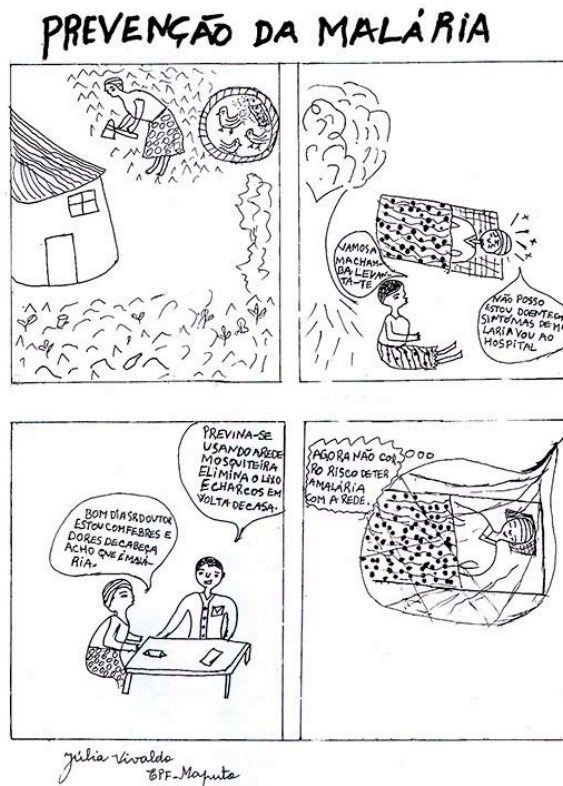
especially those unfamiliar with comics! Also check out, Marek Bennett's literacy/educational works: <http://comicsworkshop.wordpress.com/>.

Some texts you can USE in YOUR CLASSROOM:

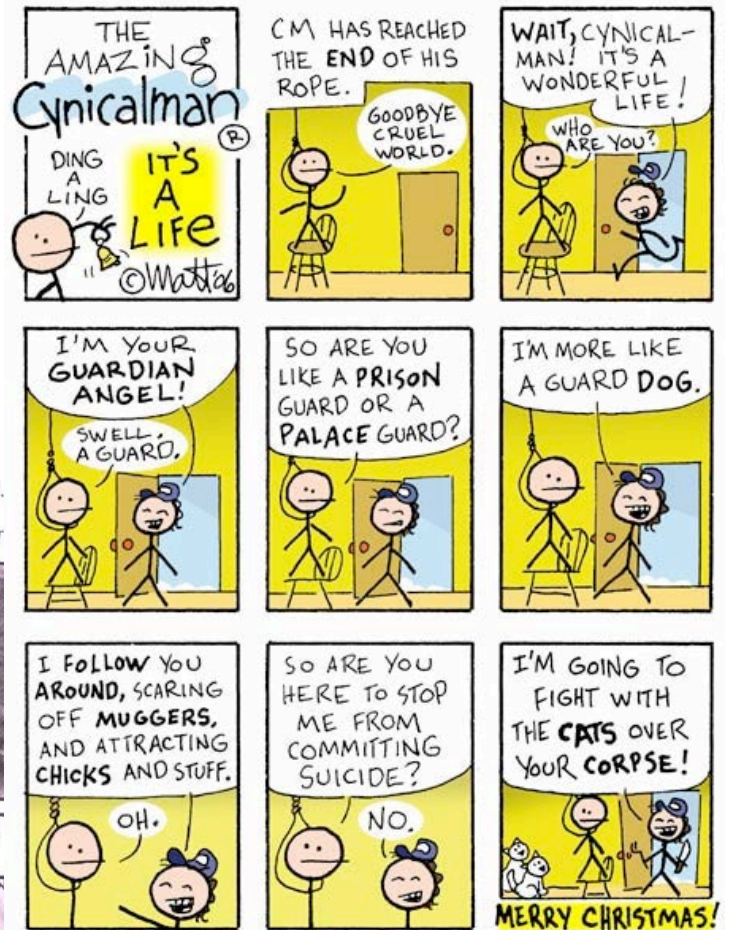
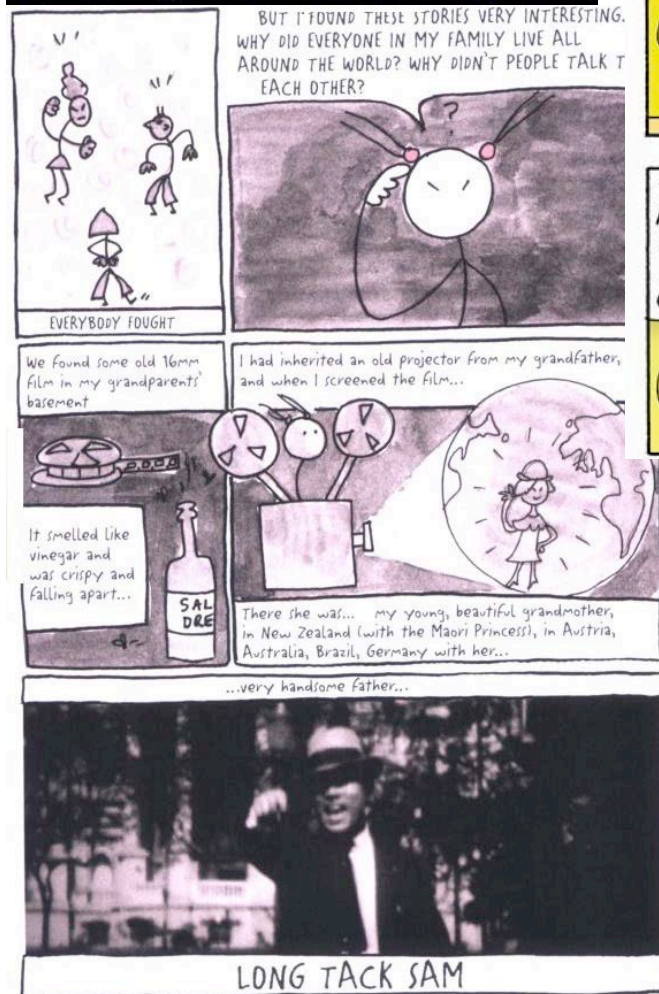
- Barefoot Gen – Japanese Manga on Hiroshima
- Persepolis – memoir of Iranian woman coming of age
- Blankets – fictional memoir of teenage years and first relationship
- ABC – light but deep tale of Asian-American working through identity issues
- Fun Home – memoir of daughter coming to terms with her father's double life
- Stitches – memoir of artist and his childhood
- To Teach – Bill Ayers' classic text on teaching brought to comics form
- Jim Ottaviani – writes science/history comics – very appropriate for all-ages classrooms
- Maus – Pulitzer prize-winning holocaust tale, important work, set stage for others to follow
- After the Deluge – account of Hurricane Katrina through the stories of six survivors – comics as journalism (see also Joe Sacco "Palestine," Guibert "the Photographer")
- see list for more

Some suggestions for those who don't draw:

- Tools: ComicLife software: <http://comiclife.com/>, Collage
- Collaboration – Besides allowing contributors to bring their respective expertise to the project, collaboration also opens possibility for new ways of seeing for both parties. Like the dance between text and image, the interaction of writer and artist may result in another form of resonance.
- Examples of drawing that isn't so well drawn – ideas carry the day: Molly Bang's Little Red Riding Hood, Long Tack Sam, Matt Feazel/Cynicalman, Lynda Barry (Picture This), asks why draw?, and why we stop – and why it is so important to keep drawing







Examples here from Molly Bang's *Picture This*, Feazel's *Cynicalman* and *Long Tack Sam*.

Some exercises:

- Classroom resources: MCPOP: <http://mcpopmb.ning.com/group/graphicnovelscomics>

- A “prezi” on teaching comics, made by a teacher:  
<http://andrewwales.blogspot.com/2011/07/comics-in-classroom-prezi.html>
- One page, six/seven panel sequence: How you got here – metaphor, literal
- Adapt a poem, song – note similarities media
- Exercises: Missing Text (Calvino/NYer), Missing Image, Jam comic
- Consider Matt Madden’s 99 Ways to Tell a Story – in which he retells a very simple story told in 7 panels, 99 different ways. Great for thinking about retelling, what to focus on, why we make some choices over others (Based on Raymond Queneau’s Exercises in Style)



Sample pages from Matt Madden’s “99 Ways to Tell a story”  
Comics Reading list



### Highly Recommended – Essential List:

- Madden, M. & Abel, J. *Drawing words and writing pictures*.
- McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding comics*. Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, Inc.
- Monnin *Teaching graphic novels*
- Carter *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels*.
- Ayers, W., & Alexander-Tanner, R. (2010). *To teach: The journey in comics*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Barry, L. (2010). *Picture this: The near-sighted monkey book*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly.
- Bitz, M. *When commas meet kryptonite*.
- Carter, J.B. *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels*.
- the Comic Book Project: <http://www.comicbookproject.org/>
- Drooker, E. *Flood*.
- Eisner, W. *Comics and sequential art*.
- Eisner, W. *Dropsie avenue: The neighborhood*.
- Fleming, A.M. *The Magical Life of Long Tack Sam*.
- Gaiman, N. *The Sandman*.
- Groensteen, T. (2007). *The system of comics*. (B. Beaty & N. Nguyen, Trans.). Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.
- Guibert/Lefevre. *The photographer*.
- Kuper, P. *The system*.
- Madden, M. & Abel, J. *Drawing words and writing pictures*. [Drawing Words Writing Pictures SITE](#)
- Making Curriculum Pop educational resource network: <http://mcpopmb.ning.com/group/graphicnovelscomics>
- On teaching graphic novels: [http://mcpopmb.ning.com/group/graphicnovelscomics/forum/topic/show?id=2665237%3ATopic%3A58150&xg\\_source=msg](http://mcpopmb.ning.com/group/graphicnovelscomics/forum/topic/show?id=2665237%3ATopic%3A58150&xg_source=msg)
- Mazzucchelli, D. *Asterios Polyp*.
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- Ottaviani, J., etc. *Fallout*, and other titles
- Ottaviani, Cannon/Cannon. *T-minus: The race to the moon*.
- Pekar, H. & Haspiel, D. *The quitter*.
- Pekar, H., & various. *American splendor*.
- Sacco, J. *Palestine*.
- Satrapa, M. *Persepolis*.
- Small, D. *Stitches*.

Spiegelman, A. (1997). *Maus: A survivor's tale*. New York: Pantheon Books.  
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 Comic Book Literacy Film: <http://www.comicbookliteracy.com/home.html>

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## Understanding, Making and Teaching

# Comics!

a semester-long course in  
*Practice, Process, and Pedagogy*

SEE how empty  
spaces make comics  
tick and learn the ins  
and out of this unique  
visual-verbal medium



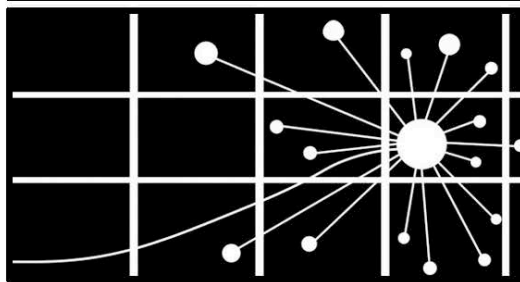
EXAMINE various genres  
- beyond superheroes...



MAKE comics - and EXPLORE your  
own creativity in the process



ENRICH your classroom practice



and DISCOVER the Promise  
and Power of comics



A&H 4199  
Taught by Nick Sousanis,  
TC doctoral candidate

2-3 Credits  
Mondays  
5:10-6:50pm

Questions? email: [nsousanis@gmail.com](mailto:nsousanis@gmail.com)

Check out Sousanis's comics here:  
[www.spinweaveandcut.com](http://www.spinweaveandcut.com)

Nick Sousanis can be reached at [nsousanis@gmail.com](mailto:nsousanis@gmail.com). For his comics, please see

[www.spinweaveandcut.com](http://www.spinweaveandcut.com)

More comics and education resources at [www.comicsclassroom.wikispaces.com](http://www.comicsclassroom.wikispaces.com)