



**Visual literacy: to comics or not to comics?  
Promoting literacy using comics**

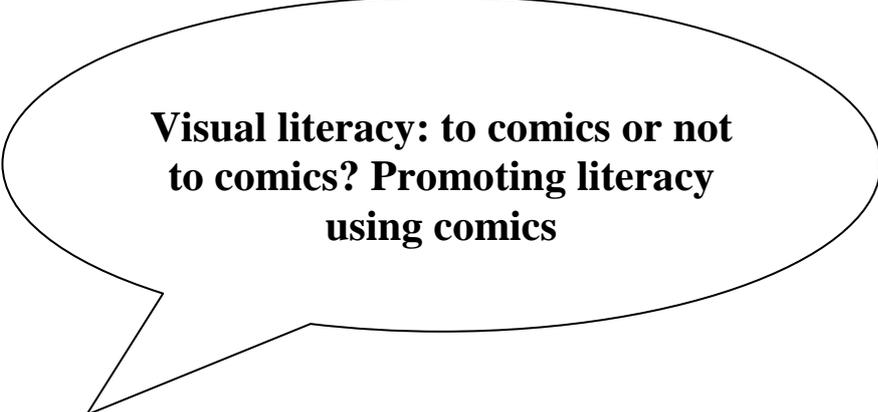
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**Abstract**

*The 21<sup>st</sup> century is a visual world with a visual culture, but also requires high levels of reading competency. Comics, as sequential art, are a pictorial representation of a narrative. Comic art combines printed words and pictures in a unique way. Many literacy skills are required, including the ability to understand a sequence of events, to interpret the characters' nonverbal gestures, to discern the story's plot and to make inferences.*

*This paper investigates the roots of comics, characteristics and types of comics and value of comics as a source of promoting literacy. The question to be answered is what role comics could play to get children engaged in reading and developing a reading habit.*

## **1. Introduction**

Reading is an essential competency in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to survive in the global economy. Teachers, librarians and parents face an enormous challenge in trying to create a reading habit. Especially in South Africa there is a high rate of illiteracy, not a vibrant reading culture and many children are reluctant readers.

Comics are part of print in the information society. Comics are a pervasive and influential media form of popular culture. For many years comics were only regarded as recreational reading, but comics become more accepted as a legitimate form of art and literature and they are making their way into classrooms (Edmunds 2006: 1).

Conferences, seminars and congresses on comics indicate interest in this genre, for example the International Conference on the Graphic Novel at the University of Massachusetts (1998), at the University of Leuven, Belgium (2000), and an annual Conference on Comics at the University of Florida. As far back as 1944, the educational use of comics was regarded of such importance that the *Journal of Educational Sociology* devoted the entire Volume 18, Issue 4 to the topic (Yang 2003: 1).

## **2. Visual literacy**

We live in a visual society. Television, film, the Internet and advertising rely very strong on the power of images and pictures. The NetGeneration is visual communicators. According to Barry (1997: 75; 78) it is images, not words, that communicate most deeply, and when an image is combined with words, like in a comic strip, the words become secondary but the language of images remains primary.

Visual literacy - the ability to interpret the meaning of illustrations of various kinds (Fenwick 1998: 132), to read pictures - is seen as being part of children's reading development. Hughes (1998: 115-116) regards visual literacy as an important skill across the school curriculum and describes visual literacy across the curriculum as:

- Reading images in the world around us – often commercial;
- Reading pictures in books;
- Using visual images to support reading of simple texts;
- Reading symbols and pictures in the school/classroom environment to promote literacy;
- Creating meaningful visual images to record understanding of tasks;
- Using pictures in non-fiction texts to support learning of subject knowledge;
- Using pictures in fictional texts to support learning of subject knowledge;
- Reading the page – different ways in which text and pictures may be presented.

Picture books and comics support visual literacy. Children learn to read pictures before they can read print. Comics are a visual medium that combines the written word with the visual concept. Comics are a way of graphic storytelling. Images are more direct than written texts.

Comic readers have to learn to read comic books and need to develop a certain “comics literacy”. To read comics or a graphic novel the critical skills needed for all reading comprehension are needed. This requires many essential literacy skills, including the ability to understand a sequence of events, to interpret characters’ nonverbal gestures, to discern the story’s plot, and to make inferences (Lyga 2006). This literacy includes understanding the unique language of comics as well as knowing how to decipher comic books. Readers need to understand the basic vocabulary of language in comics - words, pictures, and other icons – and how these elements interact (Pustz 1999: 121). Reading comics requires active involvement from the reader.

### **3. Comics**

#### **3.1 Historical overview**

Comic books have a rich history. Using images and sequences of pictures to communicate were common in early civilizations and ancient cultures, for example cave drawings, the Egyptian hieroglyphics and stained glass windows showing Biblical scenes. The Bayeux tapestry in Normandy (c1100) has sometimes been claimed to be an early example of a strip cartoon (Sabin 2005: 11).

Rodolphe Töpffer, a Swiss artist, formalised his thoughts on the *picture story* in his *Essay on Physiognomics* in 1845 (*Comics* 2007: 3). Satirical drawings like *Punch* in newspapers were popular through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Germany in 1865 the strip Max and Moritz, by Wilhelm Bush was published in a newspaper (*Comics* 2007: 4). Comics as we know now were first created in the last half of the nineteenth century in England when the first regular comic strip appeared in 1884 with the first comics hero, *Ally Sloper*. This was followed by *Comic Cuts* in 1890. In the United States the first comic character - The Yellow Kid - appeared in 1896 (Saraceni 2003: 1).

Comic strips became very popular and in the early 1930s some publishers began to publish them in the form of a book. In Europe (especially in Belgium, France, Italy and Spain) children’s magazines began to publish comics during the 1930s. These comics became very popular, the most famous of whom Herge’s Tintin, which is still a favourite in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Superman made his first appearance in 1938 and Batman the following year (Saraceni 2003: 2). Comic books began in the 1930s as reprint collections of newspaper strips (Pustz 1999; 26).

In the late 1940s the so-called “crime” and “horror” comics became popular. Crime and violence were portrayed and many people worried about the effect that these comics might have on children. These concerns gave rise to campaigns against comics. *Peanuts*, with Charlie Brown and his dog Snoopy, one of the all-time favourites, was created during the 1950s (Saraceni 2003: 3). *Asterix* made his appearance in 1959 and is still a best seller.

Superheros like Spiderman and The Fantastic Four appeared in the early 1960s. It was also during this time that underground comics, called “comix” were published (Pustz 1999: 60). These were intended for adult readers.

Comics became more intellectual and started to attract scholarly attention, especially in Europe. At the end of the 1970s the first “graphic novel” - *A contract with God* – was published. This novel was aimed at adults. The comic by Art Spiegelman (1986), *Maus*, which portrayed life in the concentration camp of Auswitz, established comics as an adult art form (Saraceni 2003: 3).

Throughout Europe and Latin America, and in Canada and Japan, comics are now regarded as artistic and cultural productions. “The comic book has evolved from humble beginnings into a graphically sophisticated and culturally revealing medium” (Sabin 2005). Improvements in printing technology have brought a radical transformation in the way comics are produced. Previously the common image of a comic was of a cheaply produced throwaway, but today photographic-quality paper and fully painted artwork are commonplace (Sabin 2005: 7). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century comics explore new possibilities offered by digital graphics and the Internet. Many popular Hollywood films are based on, or adapted from comic books, for example Spiderman, Superman, Batman, Daredevil and The Fantastic Four.

### 3.2 Characteristics of comics

The early comic strips, both in England and America, were of a humorous nature and the attribute “comic” remained, although there is most often no trace of comical elements in many comics today (Saraceni 2003: 4). The term “comic” was accepted through popular usage and refer to the form rather than the content. The term “graphic novel” (short novels done in the medium of comics), is an extension of the “comic book” as visual narrative.

Comics are seen as “a narrative form consisting of pictures arranged in sequence” (Varnum & Gibbons 2001: xvi). McCloud (1993) and Eisner (1985) underline “sequential art” as the unique character of comics.

“Comics (or, less commonly, sequential art) is a form of visual art consisting of images which are commonly combined with text, often in the form of speech balloons or image captions” (*Comics* 2007: 1).

Kannenber (2001: 183) describes the pictures in a comic as the visual narrative and the word as the textual narrative.

Comics are thus characterised by

- the combination of both words and pictures, with a relatively small number of words;
- the sequential order of these images organised into units, graphically separated from each other.

Comics have the following components: Panels, gutters, balloons and captions (Saraceni 2003: 7-10).

- The panels: Each page is normally composed of a number of rectangular frames named panels.
- The gutter: Each panel is separated from the others by a blank space called the gutter.
- The balloon: The use of balloons, in which text is inserted and imposed into the panel which contains the pictures, is one of the principal characteristics of comics. Other types of print such as children's books and advertising also combine images and words, but the use of balloons is unique to comics (Khordoc 2001: 156 - 157). The balloons contain direct speech, but significant proportions of it are essentially narrative. It shows that a character is speaking (in the first person) and this makes the reader's involvement in the story much deeper.

Balloons may report speech or thought. The tail of the balloon indicates the character who is speaking or thinking.

- The caption: The caption is not inside the panel, but is always a separate entity, at the top or bottom of the panel. The text in the caption represents the narrator's voice and add information to the dialogues in the balloons.



Artists who produce comics bring their own individual style to this medium. Two basic art styles - realistic and cartoony - have been identified (*Comics 2007: 6*).

- The cartoony style uses comic effects and a variation of line widths. Characters tend to have rounded, simplified anatomy.
- The realistic style focuses more on realistic anatomy and shapes.

Superheroes are very popular characters in comics. Superheroes are the modern myth, and we create myths to solve impossible, inhumanly large problems. Many comic books involve some form of masculine power fantasy and are very popular among male readers. Boys love the action adventure of comics.

The use of both pictures and words together is not a unique characteristic of comics, but the way in which these elements interact with each other is. The arrangement into sequences of panels makes comics different from cartoons, which are composed of

one panel only. Illustrated children's books and picture books have a structural difference from comics. Both of them involve a series of images that tell a story coupled with a text. The structural difference is that children's books make use of narration boxes instead of word balloons, and comics use panels.

Most readers are familiar with the two fundamental forms of comics, namely comic strips (simply a sequence of cartoons, most commonly four panels long) in newspapers or magazines, and comic books and graphic novels, which are longer comic stories.

Web comics are online comics available on the Internet (*Comics* 2007: 8).

Instructional comics are utilized to convey information, for example, strips designed for educative or informative purposes like the instructions on an aeroplane's safety card (*Comics* 2007: 8).

#### **4. The value of comics in getting children engaged in reading and developing a reading habit.**

Comics are a controversial art form. Over a lengthy period of time comics have provoked debate. In the United States, comics have traditionally been considered a "lowbrow medium" (Varnum & Gibbons 2001: x). Many adults have reservations about comic books as acceptable reading material for children. Since the early 1940s librarians had been worried about comic books and comics were seen as an enemy of other reading. An article by a children's librarian Jean Gray Harker in 1948 argued that comic books were among the most profound and cultural threats of the day.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century children's lives are dominated by television, video games, play stations and the Internet - all visual media. Children of all ages are able to respond to visual texts. The direct approach of comics makes the reader a participant in one way or another. Young readers feel involved in the story as they experience it visually and directly. Comics usually require less effort to read. The messages of the pictures are being assisted by the short, readable texts. The format of picture and text can hold a child's attention longer than print only.

One of the first goals in reading development is the nurturing of positive attitudes toward reading. A positive attitude toward reading is an important factor in the development of a reading habit. Reading comics is a way to develop a positive attitude towards reading and to get children engaged in reading. Comics entertain. Children usually enjoy comics and read them for pleasure. Enjoyment of reading comics could lead to enjoying other reading materials. Children are more likely to continue reading once they think of reading as enjoyable. Two large surveys, both of 8,000 learners, conducted in the United Kingdom in 1977 and repeated in 1996 found that comics are the most potent form of periodical reading (Fenwick 1998: 132).

Even before a child is ready to read text, sequential art can give them practice in making meaning from material printed on a page, tracking left to right and top to bottom, interpreting symbols, and following the sequence of events in a story. Sequential art provides plenty of opportunity for connecting the story to children's own experiences, predicting what will happen and inferring what happens between

panels, just as they would do with a text story. The advantage of sequential art is that children do not need to be able to decode text to learn and practice comprehension skills (Edmunds 2006).

Parents would purchase comic books to encourage reading, especially for children who have difficulty with reading text only. Many children become intimidated and overwhelmed and give up when they are confronted with pages and pages of text. Reading comics can motivate them to read.

Many adults begun with superhero comic books as children and never stopped enjoying reading comics. Comic book readers feel a sense of ownership, collect comics and join fan clubs (*Comics* 2007: 5).

An academic study of children's comic book reading habits – “The children talk about comics” - was already done in 1949 by Katherine Wolf and Marjorie Fiske (Pustz 1999: 33). They found that many children prefer comic reading to all other activities. Learners who can read well as well as learners with reading problems are attracted to comics.

The value of comics in the classroom gets more and more attention, for example:

- Educational journals such as *The Reading Teacher* acknowledge that comics have a motivational power in literacy development for children (Grant 2006).
- The New York City Comic Book Museum offers a complete English curriculum built around comics (Starr 2004).
- *Kids love Comics* (KLC) is an organization of professionals and patrons of the comic book, publishing, and children's book industries, dedicated to increasing awareness and interest in kid's comics (<http://www.kidslovecomics.com>).
- The Comic Book Project (<http://www.comicbookproject.org>) is an arts-based literacy and learning initiative to help children developing their literacy skills by writing, designing, and publishing original comic books. Children write and draw about their personal experiences and interests, thereby engaging them in the learning process.

Some evidence of the positive role of the incorporation of comics into school reading practices in the early years is provided by the results of Marsh's study in two Sheffield schools in the United Kingdom (Marsh & Millard 2000: 110). Comics can be used in the classroom in a variety of ways.

Comics have the ability to present complex material in readable text and can assist in teaching subjects like science and social studies. In recent years, a few scientists and comic book artists have joined forces to portray scientific facts in comic format, for example the comic books by Jay Hosler, a biologist, explaining in one of his books Darwin's evolution theory to a tiny follicle mite living in his eyebrow (Ulaby 2005: 1). The *Cartoon history of the universe II* (Gonick 1994) presents history with irony and humour. The comic format can be used to present facts about drugs, nutrition, birth control, AIDS, and other issues to teenagers in an appealing way. The Rothamsted Research Lab is publishing comics with stories about various science topics called Science Stories Comic ([www.bbrc.ac.uk/life/comic](http://www.bbrc.ac.uk/life/comic)).

Comics can foster language development in various ways. According to Stephen Cary, a second language learner specialist, “Comics provides authentic language learning opportunities ... The dramatically reduced text of comics makes them manageable and language profitable for even beginning level readers” (Starr 2004). Readability makes comics attractive to young readers. The language used in comics is language used in every day conversations. Comic speech and thought are reported directly. The language in comics is usually personal and brief. This is in general much simpler than it is in conventional literary texts. Comics are ideal for comprehension work, as well as teaching punctuation. The contents of the bubbles is usually direct speech and this can teach learners what direct speech entails (Fenwick 1998: 142). Comics can expand a child’s vocabulary by giving contexts to words that the child would not normally have been exposed to (Grant 2006).

Comics can enhance second language learning. Comics present language in action. They help improve reading development for learners struggling with language acquisition, as the illustrations provide contextual clues to the meaning of the written narrative (Edmunds 2006). Adaptations of literary works in comic format can be useful in English classes.

Children can learn story elements through reading comics. Almost always fiction, comics are useful for introducing concepts such as narrative structure and character development (Grant 2006: 1). Like novels, comics and graphic novels have a beginning, middle, and end as well as a main character or characters that develop through conflicts and the story’s climax.

The availability of suitable comics for classroom use is still limited. Some feature violent images and or adult topics. It takes careful planning and consideration to choose comics for educational purposes. Mthombothi Studios in South Africa is publishing educational comics “The adventures of Themba and Bizza”, typical comic book heroes, and their adventures are set against a background of Southern African history and mythology. These books are also being translated into several languages.

Research by Krashen and Ujiie in the United States showed that middle school (ages 10-14) boys who were heavy comic book readers liked reading more, read more in general, and read more books than lighter comic book readers, who in turn read more than non-comic book readers (Krashen 2005). Research done in Scotland has confirmed that comic book reading could be the key to encouraging more young boys to read and to read comics could improve literacy rates (Schofield 2005).

A comic book collection in the school library and in the children’s department in the public library could be an innovative way to attract children to the library. Tintin and Asterix are favourites in the library. To encourage children to make a transition from comics to other traditional reading materials, comic books are shelved between other reading materials. Comics are a way to begin to convince children that the library does have something to offer them.

## **5. Conclusion**

The comic book has been one of the most familiar, but least appreciated popular art forms. Comics can be seen as a way to get children to enjoy reading and to read for

pleasure. The focus used to be on getting children to read the so-called “good” literature. A paradigm shift indicates that the primary concern now is simply to get children reading. “Children have a lot more to worry about from their parents who raised them than from the books they read” (Doctorow) (*Books and reading* 2002: 19)

Comics reduce the amount of text in a story to a manageable level and give learners whole stories that they can complete reading in a reasonable time. The use of comics in school can provide a link to the reading experience of children for whom books and reading may be associated predominantly with schoolwork.

Comics can thus play a role to motivate reluctant readers, engage children in reading, develop the comprehension and language skills of second-language learners and teach visual literacy. Comics can provide a stepping stone to other kinds of reading and their acceptance as part of reading materials especially at school can support children who are reluctant to read for pleasure. “Comics are books, too”.

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