

Design Resource

Comics in Education

The Growth of Comics

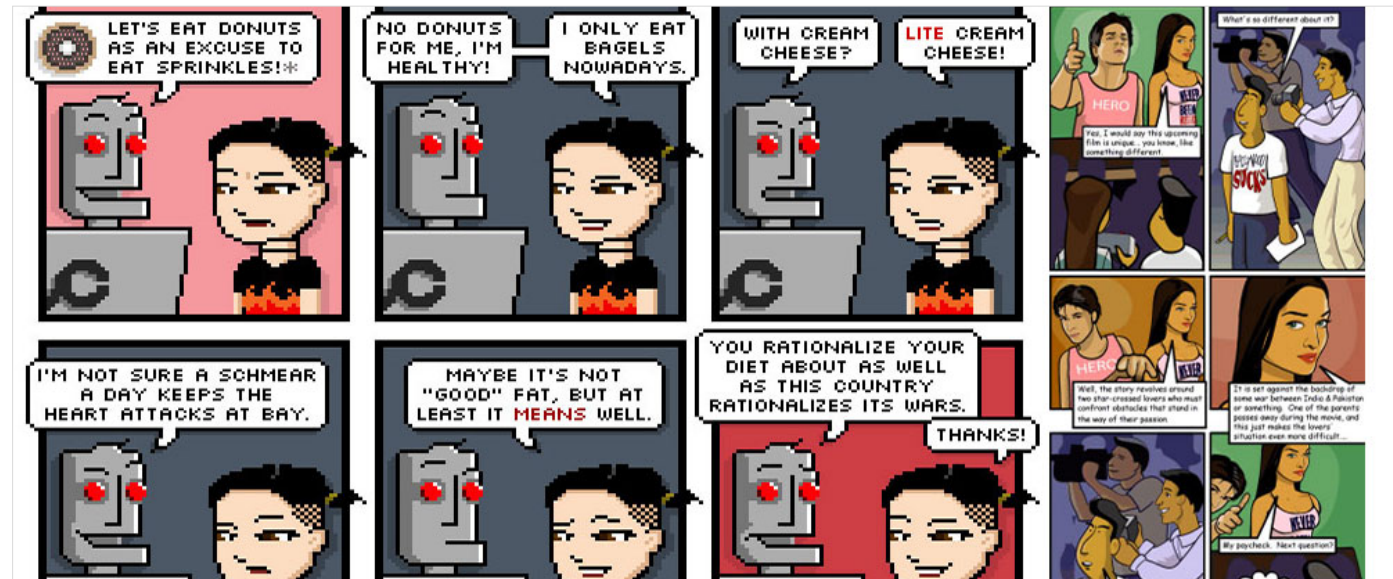
by

Saurabh Singanapalli

IDC, IIT Bombay

Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/comics-education>



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2. The Beginnings
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Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/comics-education/introduction>

Introduction

Ever since their rise to popularity in the early 20th century, comic books have been considered for educational purposes. At the same time, critics of comic books have panned them for the possible negative effects that they could have on children. Perhaps as a result of this debate, while comic books have long been explored for use in the classroom, it is only recently that these efforts have found widespread acceptance and currency.

This article will begin with a historical overview of the use of comics in education, and then explore current attempts at using comics as textbooks in a variety of disciplines. It will also take a brief look at current practices in designing comic books for educational purposes, and hence should be of interest to those interested in education as well as instructional design using comic books.



One of the covers of Instructor magazine by Scholastic, showcasing the rising presence of comic books in the classroom.

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The Beginnings

- Early debates around comics
- An optimistic outlook

In 1657, John Amos Comenius, a Czech teacher, educator and writer, published *Orbis Sensualium Pictus*, an illustrated Latin textbook for children. This was probably one of the first examples of pictures being used in formal textbooks. It became renowned and was widely circulated. While not exactly a comic, it has some relevance to the debates that came later, as we shall see. Since the dawn of the 20th century, comics had been finding ever greater currency and circulation. The cartoon had evolved into the comic strip which in turn had grown into the full-fledged comic magazine. Even as comics became more and more popular worldwide, during the 1930s, they increasingly began to draw the attention of academics. This was true especially in the United States, where comics saw phenomenal growth and were read by a large percentage of children. Educators were thus forced to turn their attention to this medium and it underwent rigorous scrutiny. It was by no means a straightforward path, for there were an equal number of critics and supporters of comics. Gray (1942) outlines the following problems that North (1940) stated with respect to comics:

Badly drawn, badly written, and badly printed—a strain on young eyes and young nervous systems—the effect of these pulp-paper nightmares is that of a violent stimulant. Their crude blacks and reds spoil the child's natural sense of color; their hypodermic injection of sex and murder makes the child impatient ... Unless we want a coming generation even more ferocious than the present one, parents and teachers throughout America must band together to break the “comic” magazine...

However, in the same paper, Gray quotes two professors of the time, W.W. Sones and Robert Thorndike, who strongly advocated using comics for educational purposes. In the pamphlet *Children and Comic Magazines*, Sones says:

The comic book is a widespread feature of the current environment of children. As such it must be recognized by parents and teachers as an influence on child growth and development. Whether it is to be positive or negative in its effects can be controlled. If comic books are ignored, ridiculed, or forbidden, we encourage rebelliousness, the forbidden fruit is made more attractive, and an opportunity is lost to share an interest with the child. On the other hand, both in school and at home this interest may be capitalized to promote many lines of desirable growth and development. (as quoted in Gray, 1940).

Of course, this is mostly a reactionary defence against the criticisms, such as the above mentioned examples stated by North, which were being levelled at comic books. However, Sones also felt that comic books brought a number of distinct benefits to the child, as he later stated in his paper *The Comics and Instructional Method* (1944). He says:

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The potency of the picture story is not a matter of modern theory but of anciently established truth. Before man thought in words, he felt in pictures... It's too bad for us "literary" enthusiasts, but it's the truth nevertheless, pictures tell any story more effectively than words. (Sones, 1944, p. 239)

Similarly, with respect to the use of comics in teaching and learning language, Robert Thorndike praised comics in his preliminary report on the study of comic magazine vocabulary:

We have here an educational resource which (1) provides many thousands of words of reading experience;(2) introduces the child to a wide range of vocabulary, including many useful words which stand in need of additional practice by the typical child in Grades IV-VIII; (3) provides interest appeal and picture context to make reading and vocabulary experience of a fairly advanced level attractive even to the retarded reader. The teacher and librarian should be aware of the positive contribution of these materials as an out-of-school supplement to the child's reading experience. (as quoted in Gray, 1940).

The very fact that such debates were taking place shows that comics were increasingly being considered a bona fide literary genre, and their use in education, and their place in school libraries, was beginning to be taken seriously. They were no longer just 'funnies' that appeared in the back pages of newspapers. Comics researcher Gene Yang (Yang, 2003) cites the work of a number of educators, including Sones (1944), to describe how comics had made their mark upon the consciousness of American academia:

Academia took notice, initiating over a decade of debate, research, and writing on the educational value of comic books. University of Pittsburgh professor W. W. D. Sones (1944) reports that between 1935 and 1944, comics "evoked more than a hundred critical articles in educational and nonprofessional periodicals"... Many of Sones' contemporaries undertook similar research. Robert Thorndike and George Hill, for example, analyzed the vocabulary of words found within comic books... Paul Witty led a study examining the reading content of comic books with 2500 school children... Educators also began designing comics-supported curriculums. Thorndike partnered with DC Comics and Harold Downes to create a language arts workbook that starred Superman (Sones, 1944). A few years later, the Curriculum Laboratory of the University of Pittsburgh and the Comics Workshop of New York University devised and implemented an experiment using Puck – the Comic Weekly in hundreds of American classrooms... The educational use of comics was of such importance that the Journal of Educational Sociology devoted the entirety of 1944's Volume 18, Issue 4 to the topic.

Through the 1940s, therefore, the outlook of comics in education was optimistic, notwithstanding the opposition from many quarters, for there were a number of educators looking at comics as legitimate learning material. However, things were soon to change, as we shall see in the next section.

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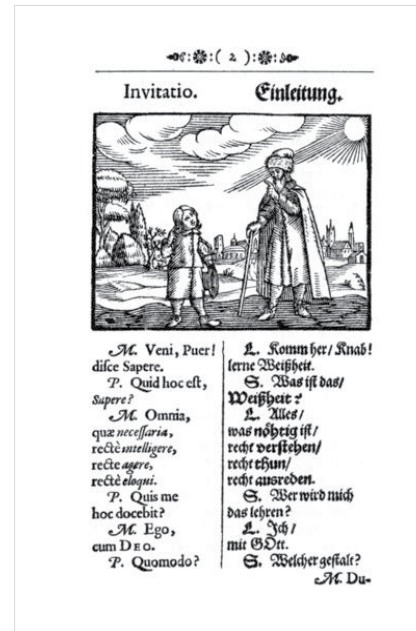
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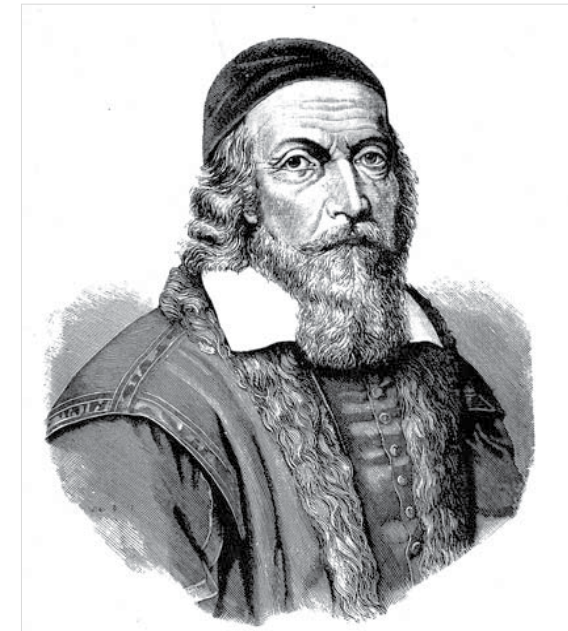
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A page from *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (1657) by John Amos Comenius, one of the first textbooks for children to use illustrations combined with text.



John Amos Comenius (1592-1670), the writer of *Orbis Sensualium Pictus*, is also considered the father of modern education.

Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comenius>

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Comics and Censorship

- Testimonies against comics
- The CCA
- Underground Comics

While comics had their advocates, they also had a fair share of critics. Although in Europe and Asia, comics did not face much opposition from educators or critics, in the United States the battle lines were drawn between those who would use comics in education and those that saw them as a distracting, and often corrupting, influence on young learners. The debate raged on in America through the 1940s, until the scales were tilted through the intervention of Dr. Frederic Wertham.

Wertham, a psychiatrist specializing in juvenile delinquency, was an outspoken critic of comics and was in favour of government regulation of the medium. His book *The Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) criticized comic books and magazines for their depiction of violence, sex, crime and drug use. Wertham was especially harsh on the popular crime and horror comics published by houses such as EC Comics. *The Seduction of the Innocent* raised issues that catapulted Wertham to international fame and drove parents' groups to call for a greater control over comics. Wertham was chosen as an expert witness to testify for the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, and used various panels from contemporary comic book publications to make a case holding comics responsible for the rise in juvenile delinquency. This led to the Senate Subcommittee recommending that publishers tone down the content in comics, a direct result of which was the establishment of the Comics Code Authority (CCA). The CCA was formed in 1954 by comic book publishers – who may have seen this as a preventive measure to avoid further criticism or even an outright ban – to regulate the content of comic books in the United States. As part of the Code, a lot of restrictions were placed on publishers. For example, policemen, judges, government officials, and respected institutions could not be portrayed in any way that would “create disrespect for established authority”; it was required that “in every instance good shall triumph over evil”; it was forbidden to show “instances of law enforcement officers dying as a result of a criminal’s activities”; and “excessive violence” or “lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations” could not be used. Thus, the CCA became a censor for comic books, pushing the horror-comic and crime-comic genres out of publication, and leaving only the very tame form of superhero comics as the sole remaining popular comic genre.

And the U.S.A. wasn't alone in their censorship of comics: in the UK, the government had already passed the Children & Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act in 1955, and in Australia and New Zealand some publishers adopted a Code of Publishing Ethics that was similar to the CCA. As a reaction to the censorship, however, a new movement of Underground Comics began to gain momentum. These were comic books that depicted content that was unacceptable or forbidden under censorship codes like the CCA, and were mostly self-published and distributed on a small scale. In the 1980s, these were finally recognized by mainstream publishing houses, and some were even incorporated into the mainstream as the CCA hold loosened somewhat.

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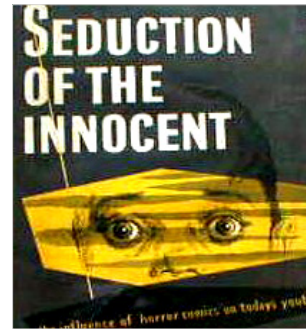
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However, notwithstanding underground comics, for the twenty years immediately following the establishment of the CCA, the use of comics in education took a firm back seat. Comics were not felt to be suitable for children even as general reading, so elevating them to the level of formal classroom material in schools was out of the question. There were practitioners who used the medium in their classes, but these were very few and mainly exceptions to the rule. It was only in the 1970s that the next tentative attempts were made to bring comic books back into the classroom. It was slow and uncomfortable progress, but the recovery process had already begun. Although many educators continued to be uneasy about comics, this set the stage for the graphic novel which provided the impetus that would finally tilt the scales again in favour of pictorial narratives and sequential art.

Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/comics-education/comics-and-censorship>



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Comics for Learning

- Advantages of using comics in the classroom
- Current classroom perspectives
- Comics as Institutional aids

The advent of the modern graphic novel gave a new impetus and sense of legitimacy to the use of comics and graphic novels in education (especially after Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, a graphic novel about the Holocaust, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992), and this newfound acceptance caused more teachers to use comics in the classroom, and even more importantly, it encouraged them to talk about their experiments with the genre in the classroom. According to Yang (2003a) this change in attitude is concurrent with the rise of the graphic novel as a literary form:

The tension of education's uneasy new relationship with comics was somewhat eased in 1992 when Art Spiegelman's *Maus* became the first comic book to win a Pulitzer Prize (Sturm, 2001). *Maus*, Spiegelman's biography of his father's Holocaust experience, was the most public example of a decades-long movement within the comics community towards artistically mature, literate work. A flurry of articles appeared in news publications across the nation proclaiming that comics had finally "grown up".

In the present-day educational scene, comics and graphic novels are being increasingly considered to be legitimate classroom materials and are used as tools in the classroom. The Internet has helped dissipate ideas about using comics in the classroom through teachers' forums and educational websites, so much so that many teachers consider the use of graphic novels in school curricula as essential. Thus, research on graphic novels is now accepted as not only worthwhile, but also necessary. The principal reasons that make graphic novels appealing for teaching purposes are:

(i) Although identified primarily as a literary genre, the use of the graphic novel in the classroom has not been confined to just the study of language and literature. The motivational benefits of using the sequential pictorial narrative in the classroom are well-documented.

(ii) They can be used across disciplines. Fields such as mathematics or even biology are considered well within the range of teaching and learning possible through comic books, as evidenced by the number of webcomics available that try to deal with these subjects. Yang (2003b) supports this:

Comics can also scaffold to disciplines and concepts outside of the language arts. For example, Jay Hosler's *Sandwalk Adventures*, a comic book starring Charles Darwin and a talking follicle mite, introduces readers to evolutionary biology...

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The syllabi of many history courses already include the aforementioned Maus.... Beyond specific works, the very act of creating comics is an interdisciplinary activity. In addition to reading and writing, comics-based projects can develop drawing, computer, and research skills. Many of the skills used in comics creation can be applied to film-making, illustration, and even Web design.

(iii) Also, Scott McCloud elaborates on the advantages of using comics in the classroom in *Understanding Comics* (1993):

In learning to read comics we all learned to perceive time spatially, for in the world of comics, time and space are one and the same (p. 100). Time within a comic book progresses only as quickly as the reader moves her eyes across the page. The pace at which information is transmitted is completely determined by the reader. In educational settings, this “visual permanence” firmly places control over the pace of education in the hands (and the eyes) of the student.

Hence, the advantages that comics bring to the classroom, as well as recognition of the multidisciplinary possibilities that they offer, have led more and more teachers to see them as a valid teaching tool, not just for literature or language study, but for the study of practically any subject that needs to be taught.

Current classroom perspectives

An increasing number of educators are in fact beginning to realize the value that the graphic novel brings to a classroom, irrespective of the field of study. Traci Gardner, an educator and writer who works on K-college curriculum and pedagogical materials, and a contributing editor to the NCTE INBOX blog, observes:

Graphic novels and comic books provide rich opportunities to explore multimodal literacy. They're anything but simple. The sophisticated relationships among images and words and layout encourage deep thinking and critical analysis. If we can help students “get” graphic novels, we will simultaneously teach them the literacy strategies they need for navigating many of the other multimodal texts they encounter in their daily lives. (Gardner, 2007)

In short, the graphic novel is not just about the written word, but also about images and the various ways in which images interact with words, and how both in turn affect the mind of the learner, causing them to think about their learning. This idea supported by Versaci (2001) who says:

Aside from engagement, comic books also help to develop much needed analytical and critical thinking skills. A common goal, regardless of the level we teach, is to help students read beyond the page in order to ask and answer deeper questions that the given work suggests about art, life, and the intersection of the two. Comic books facilitate this analysis in a way unlike more “traditional” forms of literature because in addition to making use of standard literary devices such as point of view, narrative, characterization, conflict, setting, tone, and theme, they also operate with a very complex poetics that blends the visual and the textual...

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By combining words and pictures, comic books force students, rather directly, to reconcile these two means of expression. Important and analytical questions that I pose to my students are “How would you describe the style of these pictures?” “How does this drawing style interact with the story?” “Why these particular pictures?” “How would a different style change the story?” The answers to these questions are not obvious, and by answering them, students begin to see themselves as analytical critics working to assemble and uncover the deeper meaning of a work.

Graphic novels thus cultivate ‘thinking readers’, and by extension, ‘thinking writers’. Teachers have begun to understand the benefits of the genre for reading and writing. Rachael Sawyer Perkins, a teacher at Dolores Street Elementary School in Carson, California, says about this medium (NCTE, 2005):

For students who lack the ability to visualize as they read, it provides a graphic sense that approximates what good readers do as they read. Moreover, it provides an excellent way for reluctant writers to communicate a story that has a beginning, middle, and end. I think comics and graphic novels are an excellent vehicle for teaching writing, as a story has to be pared down to its most basic elements. It is easy for the students to look at a short comic strip and identify story elements.

These opinions from theorists as well as classroom practitioners testify to the growing acceptance of the graphic novel as an instructional medium. In the area of language teaching, while pictorial narratives were earlier thought of only as good reading material, today teachers realize that their scope is much wider and they are a tool to aid not just reading but also writing. While the use of comics for the teaching of reading skills (or language in general) has been one of the medium’s most intuitive and obvious uses, there is ample evidence to suggest that they might also be useful for the teaching of other subjects as well. In India as well, comic magazines like Amar Chitra Katha and Tinkle were established primarily from an educational perspective. Anant Pai, the editor of the Amar Chitra Katha series, narrates how the idea for the series was born (Singh, 2009):

In June 1967, I was in Delhi, watching a TV quiz on Doordarshan. I was saddened by the fact that none of the participants knew what was the name of Lord Ram’s mother. But, they all knew who the Greek god of Mount Olympus was!

Thus, when the home-grown Indian comic magazine did make an appearance, it was as an educational and instructional medium, and was seen to be serving the interests of children. Another more recent example is that of Scholastic Corporation, a book publishing company dealing mostly in educational materials, which has developed learning materials and activities based on Jeff Smith’s comic series Bone (in fact, Scholastic publishes color editions of Bone and uses them for education as well). Thus, comics are rapidly becoming the new ‘go-to’ instructional aid in modern classrooms, and as such, there is great scope in exploring this medium and designing it (or activities around it) to make it ever more appropriate for the classroom.

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Conclusion

- Scope of designers
- Comics and Technology

We have thus seen that comics are now widely accepted in education, both as supplementary materials and as primary, authentic sources that can be studied and critiqued. However, it is obvious that not all comics may be suited to the classroom, and to all kinds of learners; there is no “one-size-fits-all”. There is the obvious point of suitability, and it is here that the designer can make a difference. How best can an existing comic be used for classes with specific needs? How best would teachers be able to use comics in the classroom? Can classroom space be modified to accommodate not just comics, but also other newer media like the Internet and the mobile phone?

Comics offer the directness, attractiveness and other advantages of images together with the ease, convenience and portability of print. And should the delivery medium change from print to electronic media, they are equally suited to e-book readers or the computer screen as well. Designers can study ways to further optimize the form of the comic book to make them ever more adaptable. A beginning for this has already been made: Stone (2009) mentions the 'vook' (video + book), launched by Bradley Inman, which is an amalgam of multimedia technology (hyperlinks, audio, and video) and printed text. Without doubt, such technology can be added to comics as well, it is up to the designer to see how feasible this is not just for the comic book, but also for the classroom. But one thing is certain: this is a field that is bursting with opportunity, and there is a lot of scope for fresh ideas to make a big difference.



The logo of Vook, a company which makes advanced e-books that include multimedia technology.

Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vook>



Bradley Inman, the founder of Vook.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bradley_Inman

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