

Introduction

The Story Behind the Stories

“WHAT’S OLD IS NEW AGAIN.” Whoever coined this phrase very well could have been referring to comic books. The medium that blossomed in the 1930s with iconic superheroes like Superman and Batman is one of the fastest-growing sectors in retail publishing. Comics and graphic novels line bookstore shelves and they are the basis of films ranging from loud blockbusters like *Iron Man* to introspective independents like *Persepolis*. The genre, which the U.S. Congress investigated in the 1950s for instigating juvenile delinquency, is now an accepted and acclaimed literary form garnering Pulitzer Prizes (Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*) and nods from the National Book Awards (Gene Luen Yang’s *American Born Chinese*).¹

Amid the newfound commercial enthusiasm over comics is a rapidly growing movement of educators who are embracing the medium as a tool for reading improvement. Many educational publishers have a how-to book on using comics in the classroom.² The Maryland State Department of Education has partnered with Disney and the comics distributor Diamond to develop its own comics-based curriculum. Now the American Library Association endorses comics as a valuable tool for reluctant readers. There is even a National Association of Comics Art Educators.³

But just as comics themselves have a long history, so does the concept of comics in the classroom. In 1944, the *Journal of Educational Sociology* devoted an entire issue to

2 Manga High

the educational use of comics, with articles such as “The Comics and Instructional Method.”⁴ These endeavors were not merely relegated to scholarly journals. In the 1940s, the publishers of Superman connected with educational researcher Robert Thorndike, best known for his Cognitive Ability Test, to create a language-arts workbook in which the Man of Steel battles dangling participles and spelling errors. Perhaps the most lasting example of educational comics was *Classic Comics*—Dickens and Melville (and many others) in comic book form. This series, which was renamed *Classics Illustrated* to disassociate it from the comics medium, could be found in dime stores, drugstores, and later in comics shops, but issues were also distributed with the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Atlantic Monthly*. It was no small press—most of the editions began with a first printing of 250,000 copies, and at its height the series generated monthly sales between \$2 million and \$5 million dollars. The most popular title, *Ivanhoe*, was reissued twenty-four times over three decades.⁵

What’s old is new again, indeed. Several publishers have recently issued classic novels in comic book form.⁶ One large test-prep publisher produced a graphic novel featuring three hundred of the most common SAT vocabulary words: “The Psychic Commandos *defiantly* burst through the cargo door . . .”⁷ And now, along with grammar lessons, Superman is helping third-graders combat addition and subtraction problems in a workbook, which includes a progress chart with colorful stickers emblazoned with the superhero’s yellow and red “S.”⁸ Not to be left behind, academics are ever more frequently looking to comics and graphic novels as viable educational tools.⁹

About the Comic Book Project

From my perspective as an educator and youth advocate, the comics-in-education movement has been mostly missing the mark since the 1940s through today. While comics can be a motivational bridge to reading, and the comic book is certainly a viable literary form, a more comprehensive—and arguably more authentic—educational approach is to engage children in writing and designing their own comic books and then publishing those works in their schools and communities. This has been the goal of the Comic Book Project (CBP), which I founded in 2001 at a middle school in New York City. Since that time, CBP has grown to encompass over fifty thousand youths across the United States, mostly in high-poverty urban schools and neighborhoods. With the support of Teachers College, Columbia University and Dark Horse Comics,

CBP became a way for underserved children to find a voice in the learning process by creating original writing and artwork about important issues in their lives.

The concept of CBP was born from my work as a graduate assistant working on *Learning In and Through the Arts*, a large-scale research study investigating the academic and social impacts of children's involvement in the arts.¹⁰ That study and others since then demonstrated to me three important factors for successful integration of the arts into the core academic learning environment. First, the arts content must be clearly and explicitly integrated with the academic content.¹¹ Second, the educational context must be socially relevant; as John Dewey argued over a century ago: "The only true education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself."¹² Finally, there must be consistent and enthusiastic support from teachers, administrators, parents, students, and community partners for successful arts integration.¹³

CBP launched as a way of initiating wide-scale and sustainable change that meets the three criteria outlined above. More than just a fun and motivational project for children, CBP began as a model for how creative thinking can bolster academic success. A second goal was to support the many inner-city children who rarely have the opportunity to be creative in school due to a lack of resources and an increased focus on standardized test preparation. The CBP concept was simple: children would plan, write, design, and produce original comic books on a socially relevant theme, then publish and distribute their work for other children to use as learning and motivational tools. The project first began in the New York City afterschool community through partnerships with nonprofit organizations like The After-School Corporation, the Children's Aid Society, and the Partnership for After School Education. Through the support of the Cleveland Foundation in 2003, CBP migrated to Cleveland as a school-day initiative where art teachers partnered with English teachers to plan, create, and publish the comics. Then to Philadelphia, Baltimore, Chicago, and on and on . . .

The comic books that children create through CBP have always been a means to the ends of creative thinking, personal expression, literacy development, and community building. Because creativity trumps art skills or writing abilities in this setting, almost every child has found a role in the process. The students often form teams, each with a writer, artist, editor, and inker. The writers draft manuscripts; the artists put forth character designs and panel layouts; the editors proof the grammar, spelling, and writing mechanics; the inkers outline the important words and images. The result

4 Manga High

has been a convergence of conventional literacy and “new” literacies, social and personal development, parent and community involvement, and individual and cultural tolerance.

CBP’s constantly evolving process has elucidated several things about the project specifically and learning in general. First, if students begin with creative thinking, rather than essay writing or figure drawing, then *all* of them can participate—boys, girls, reluctant readers, reluctant drawers, English-language learners, English-language abusers, and even the one with his feet on the desk and a permanently embedded iPod earbud. Second, children can learn extraordinary things from each other by sharing and evaluating the work of peers. For example, in the development of a new superhero, I overheard one fourth-grader say to his friend, “But *why* does Ghetto Boy fly? You gotta get to the *why* of it all.” Finally, creating a comic book can be a pathway to conventional and unconventional literacy alike. In the process, children plan the characters; delineate a plot; compose a manuscript; deliberate elements of tone and atmosphere; revise and edit their writing; concentrate on character and story development; correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation; review peer work; share and discuss storylines; and present and publish finalized works. In essence, these students, who in many cases are labeled as “underachieving,” thoroughly meet all of the benchmark standards related to literacy and English-language arts.

But in the end, it is the *content* of the student comic books that has made the most lasting impression. The students create comic books about life in the city; their finished products are distinct from the tradition of superheroes saving the world. Many stories focus on the often harsh realities of growing up in the city. The children produce comic books about themselves, their friends, and their concerns about everything from snitching to teen pregnancy. And while many professionally designed comic books feature a hero with a flowing cape and super powers, the children’s comic books are often devoid of superheroes. When I asked one fourth-grade student in the East New York neighborhood of Brooklyn why a superhero never appeared in his comic, the boy responded, “Superman don’t come here.”

About This Book

There are many, many stories to tell from the past years with CBP. Students and teachers in Cleveland who stood up to rising violence in their schools by creating comic

books about conflict resolution. A group of special education students at a charter school in Philadelphia who developed and presented comic books about tolerance. Fifth-graders at a Brooklyn afterschool program who used digital photographs of the neighborhood and school as the groundwork for a classroom graphic novel. Incarcerated youths outside of Detroit who wrote and drew about their reflections of the past and hopes for the future. And the Owl and Panther—a group of refugee children in Tucson, who scanned photographs from their home countries, then altered the color prints with sandpaper, small screwdrivers, glue sticks, and markers. The characters in their collective comic book are refugees who are guided throughout the story by a patient owl and a resolute panther through the most difficult situations imaginable: camps, prisons, deserts. The comic book ends with powerful words: “The spirit of the owl and panther inspired these children to be brave and creative. By telling their stories . . . the refugees write themselves out of their darkness.”

Nevertheless, in this book I elect to concentrate on the comic book club at Martin Luther King Jr. High School (MLKHS) in New York City. There are several reasons for this decision. First, because I live in New York City, I have had the chance to visit and observe the club frequently. Educators have sent me equally fascinating work from students in Hawaii, Baltimore, San Francisco, and all the other places that CBP has flourished, but I know these students only through the words and ink in their comic books, not personally. Second, this particular comic book club has been thriving for several years. I have seen it grow, and I have witnessed some remarkable, and equally disturbing, events and occurrences in the lives of the children and that of the club itself. Lastly, although I did have a hand in launching and sustaining this club, I have been an outside observer since its inception. The direction of the club is driven by the students, their teacher, and the program staff at the school. I have been welcomed by them all, but as an observer rather than a participant.

In many ways the comic book club at MLKHS is an outlier from the hundreds of other CBP clubs around the United States. The students here are high schoolers; most of the other participants in CBP are elementary and middle schoolers. This high school club does not follow the CBP curriculum or lesson plans, where each session is carefully outlined with a goal, handout, and activity. Rather their process is organic and varies from not only year to year but also student to student. Their teacher—Phil DeJean—is a comics fanatic, whereas most of the educators involved in CBP never imagined themselves helping students to create comic books. Unlike the younger participants who use

6 Manga High

blank paper and colored pencils to create their comics, many of the MLKHS high schoolers scan their drawings into Adobe Photoshop and colorize them digitally.

But the most dramatic difference, and the subject matter of this book, is the club members' embracing of and devotion to *manga*—Japanese comic books. Aside from the plethora of “How to Draw” guides (and the surprisingly numerous versions of the Bible in manga form), there are only a few thorough sources on the subject of manga: Paul Gravett, Adam Kern, Brigitte Koyama-Richard, and Frederick Schodt.¹⁴ Brent Wilson has demonstrated the close relationship between manga and Japanese youth identity—when young Japanese children are asked to create sequential stories, they draw manga.¹⁵ Masami Toku has explored the historical contexts of manga by focusing on one of many subgenres called *shojo* manga, written specifically for, and often by, young women.¹⁶ Perhaps the best introduction to the medium, however, is manga itself. Classic manga like the spiritual *Clover* by an all-woman manga studio and the intensely complex *Ghost in the Shell* represent just a trickle of the manga ocean that has swept across the world.¹⁷

Rather than taking an expansive view, this book focuses on the role of manga in the lives of a group of students at one high school in New York City. I divide the book into two parts. The first is an analysis and synthesis of the processes and products of the comic book club; the methodology of the resulting ethnographic study is outlined in appendix B. The second part features profiles of selected students and examples of their work. My hope is that readers will come away from this book with new ideas about literacy, cultural identity, and social development that could have practical applications both in and out of the classroom. I believe that the comic book club at Martin Luther King Jr. High School is a prime example of socially relevant education where creative learning and academic reinforcement are not mutually exclusive. But if nothing else, this book brings to light the work of dedicated high schoolers who—against many odds and without the prodding of adults—read books, write stories, and make art because their lives would be incomplete otherwise. For those of us who struggle daily to engage children in English language arts, here are students who read and write on their own simply because they find such pursuits personally meaningful and rewarding. I believe that this is a lesson for educators worth learning.