Classroom Comics: A Five-part Narrative Recounting a Teacher Action Research Study Using Comics to Teach Academic Vocabulary in the Middle Grades

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Classroom comics: A five-part narrative recounting a teacher action research study using comics to teach academic vocabulary in the middle grades

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B.A., English, University of Oregon, 1977

A Dissertation in Practice Submitted to the Graduate School at the University of Missouri-St. Louis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Education in Educational Practice

August 2016

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Wendy Saul, Ph.D.
Ralph Cordova, Ph.D.
Daniel Yezbick, Ph.D.

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Abstract

A series of five, serially produced, self-published comic books presents the genesis, execution, and subsequent analysis and discussion of a teacher action-research study using the multimodal affordance of comics in a formal, qualitative research study designed to teach highly-valued, state-tested academic vocabulary words to 8th grade middle school students in an urban K-8 setting, where 96 percent of the population was eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, and 80 percent of the school population were children of color. Building upon a socio-cultural view of literacy the author/researcher employs the narrative affordance of the comics medium ironically -- to demonstrate the autobiographical, self-reflexive, action research method, to illustrate the efficacy of comics in teaching and learning, and polemically to suggest the rational harnessing and employment of children’s out-of-school, multimodal technoliteracies in the modern, middle school classroom.

Keywords: comics, literacy, middle school, vocabulary, multimodality, transmediation, non-linguistic representation, Frayer Model, iconic-solidarity
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Preface

If you are reading this text through one of the ubiquitous online repositories of master’s theses and doctoral dissertations, you may be struck by the irony of reading a comic book (designed to be read in a physically printed pamphlet composed of traditionally collated recto and verso pages) on an electronic screen in landscape orientation, or, perhaps, on a tablet or handheld smart phone whose small viewing area may preclude the meaningful perception of an entire comics page or two-page comics spread in praesentia. A second irony may be that I am writing this preface to begin with, that I do not hasten you immediately to Issue 1 of this five-issue comic and let my work, such as it is, speak for itself.

There are reasons for this, too. In a field of endeavor long dominated by alpha-print text, one colleague, whom I greatly respect, suggested my work might shock the casual viewer, who, perusing the online repository and having landed on my actual introduction (which follows) might imagine he or she had wandered onto a site designed for children or the fans of superhero comics. Such imagining would not be entirely mistaken.

Partly for historic reasons, comics represent a marginalized mode of human expression. Since their first modern appearance in the United States in 1896, the birth of the modern comic book in 1934, and the height of the Golden Age of Comics, when 25 million comic books were sold each month, comics have persisted (to a diminishing degree) as a Sunday morning diversion in the newspapers and in the scarcely tolerated out-of-school literate practice of children and adolescents. Only in recent decades have comics gained ground as a subject worthy of serious scholarship and scientific research.
In view of the wide, nearly 600-year arc of printing technology, comics appear toward the very end, at the close of the 19th Century (not coincidentally at about the same time as film). With fixed aspect-ratio canvases easily adaptable to electronic screens, cinema and its offspring thrive across the new, digital landscape of the 21st Century, while newspapers, magazines, books, comics and the world of printing on a fixed, physical page, recede.

Ultimately, this work argues for comics as a teaching-learning resource of potential use to classroom teachers and students, transitioning from readers of alpha-print text to reader/viewers who increasingly inhabit the multimodal reality of virtual space. For a variety of reasons, work with comics may help bridge this divide from printed page to electronic screen.

This work represents a dissertation in practice, the culmination of my three-year effort to earn a doctor of education degree. The heart of this work is a formal, qualitative, action research study that I conducted in my K-8 public school in a large, urban district where I have worked for the past 20 years. I worked with two groups of 8th grade students in my computer literacy classroom over two, separate, three-week periods in the winter and spring of 2015. I instructed my students to create their own, original comics to help them master six, highly-valued academic vocabulary words, in this study, six, state-tested figures of speech.

With the support of my professors and working alongside my College of Education’s cohort of “Literacy, Language and Culture,” I embraced the challenge to create a dissertation using a hybrid, multimodal medium employing iconic, symbolic, and indexical signs – comics – the same “language” I required my students to use in mastering the six figures of speech.

Only serialization over a ten-month period made this present work possible. As a full-time practicing teacher, the amount of time needed to render the “surface” of each comics page demanded such a scheme. To carry forward the narrative, I employ many literary devices,
tropes, conceits. I adopted the dissertation’s traditional “five-chapter” structure, a choice that sets-up many tensions with the more modern, action-research approach to “sharing the story.” For those used to reading traditional alpha text, I trust you will not be disappointed, if you can tolerate the “Comic Sans” font. To my friends in the comics’ community accustomed to virtuoso visual story-telling, I must apologize, saying only that I have done my best to make real my tale of a teacher/researcher using comics in the classroom.

June 16, 2016
Issue 1 begins on recto page (1), following:
Any comics?

Nope.

“Graphic novels?”

Negative.

Between the idea and the reality: Introduction to an action research study using comics to teach academic vocabulary

Mike Phoenix
A tremendous, easy-to-read manual for those wishing to learn about Action Research and particularly for those considering the methodology for classroom research. Hendricks sets the method in an educational context and provides a conceptual and theoretical basis with step-by-step checklists and activities. The research recounted in this comic book series is indebted to this great book!

The book that started it all! McCloud’s 1993 masterpiece is still must reading for those interested in comics and how they work. You can buy it at Amazon.

While you’re buying books at Amazon, check-out “Comics’ Second City,” a great illustrated history of the comic book from a St. Louis vantage point. Did you know that the world’s largest producer of comics was located in Sparta, Illinois at a plant built, owned and operated by St. Louis World Color Printing? Yeah, if you like a book with local color, this is it!

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I’m not saying words don’t have their place.

Technology too!

They’re all just tools...

To build...

To get what we want...

Hey, any more coffee up there?

of one kind or another...
A meeting in the College of Education at a major midwestern university...

Dr. H.?

Yes, Mike. Come in!

Soon...

Have you made any progress?

Some...

Oh yes... "That..."

Have you made any progress?

Some...

Well...?

I think... so...

I'll be doing my dissertation as a series of comic books.

And?
Yes. I know. You.
What?
Why are you really here?
As my advisor I thought...

A dialogue perhaps?
Yes! A dialogue!
Ha ha ha!

A dialogue with yourself!

Myself?

You don't wear red neckties!

But...
You don't wear neckties at all, Mr. Phoenix!

Who...

No suit jacket!

Dress shirt!

Denim jeans and tennis shoes!

Now take a good look at yourself!

Jeans, Mr. Phoenix!

The real mike Phoenix!
In Conversation with himself: No... I don’t mind playing the dramatic foil— if only to indulge your Falstaffian proclivities... I appreciate the reference to Bakhtin and the dialogic nature of consciousness!

I suspect your readers remain in the dark as to your intentions!

But...

You fail to contextualize your project!

I was attempting to showcase some ways that comics may communicate visually...

Your wordless page 1?

Yes...

You employ iconic imagery to reinforce your listing of Gee’s building tasks!

On page 3 you attempt to indicate a passage of time through a sequence of panels.

Yes...

Exactly.

Well... You may need to adopt a more systematic approach. Establish your program!

You’re a third of the way through your introduction and you’re running out of space!

What do you suggest?

Be more direct! This may serve as prologue... At best! Prologue!

Don’t be coy!
Behold...

It is a journey of many miles!

Do you have your socio-cultural view of literacy and learning? Yes.

References and your data sets? Check.

Tools of ethnography and critical discourse analysis? Yes...

Confidence in your action research approach and your questions? Confidence. Yes...

Very well then, Good luck! Thank you, Sir...
I haven't gotten very far, have I. I suppose he's right about that.

He means well... And although comics may seem unconventional...

I do intend to cover much of the same, traditional ground.

That's my hope.

My 8th grade students had to express themselves through comics in our study using comics to teach academic vocabulary.

I thought it reasonable and fair to employ the same medium in my own work, sharing what we accomplished.

I foresee a series of five or more comic books!

Each "ish" focusing on a respective topic of the established, 5-chapter dissertation...

The issues published serially over the next ten months.

I shall solicit critical reaction to each issue: reviews, suggestions and commentary from teachers, professors, comics professionals, scholars and fans.

Styled after the comic book "letter cols" of the Silver-Age and continuing in each successive issue, my "Key Strokes" forum will encourage ongoing dialogue and debate.

Dear Editor,

I found your first issue very confusing. It seemed you were a bit of a novice to using to find your voice. I believe you would have been better served by thinking the issue through a bit first and then beginning with a strong essay in place. If you are submitting these academic resources in context of "Homework & Education" without fully understanding the implications of your doctoral degree in hand, I don't know why you present these kinds of information. "Homework & Education" should only be the opening essay. The next one is the real thing. What you are presenting is not useful, but only the way you attempted to write was.

Yours truly,

[Signature]
In the spring of 2016, I’ll collect the individual issues into a single trade paperback!

I hope to share a place on the shelf with Scott McCloud’s transformative 1993 treatise on the comics medium. This volume by comic book practitioner McCloud was notable too, for being written entirely in comics format!

In what may be a growing trend, Nick Sousanis explored creativity in his Columbia University PhD dissertation, “Unflattening,” executed in comics and published in 2015 by Harvard University Press.

My series of comics will provide a valuable update to scholarship in the comics field and will be among the first to present original educational research in comics format.

Embodying the first action research study of its kind, my story may prove instructive to future students and instructors in similar doctoral programs.

The use of comics to teach academic language in a public school classroom may be helpful to other teachers and of interest to school administrators, professional development personnel, parents and students!

To extend the reach of these efforts, my project shall have a prominent digital presence with free web-content presented serially in the manner of many current, on-line comics at: www.classroomcomics.net
I’m a doctoral candidate completing this dissertation for my Ed.D. The midwestern university I attend is a member of a consortium: the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED). In part, CPED came into existence to fill a perceived gap between university researchers and educational practitioners.

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act

My Literacy, Language & Culture cohort (LLC), found the workload particularly rigorous. We had to learn new terminology, complex new concepts, a new and unexpectedly alien community of practice. The workload, the schedule of classes, the writing, the group presentations, and the reading in the field - always the READING IN THE FIELD - led many of us to feel as though we were learning an entirely new language!

In 2013 I found myself in one of 4 cohorts of working educators from across the metropolitan area. We took common courses with the other cohort members. Combined, there were sixty of us in that first CPED group, each of us hoping to be in the first graduating class of 2016!

Greetings cohort members!

We were each charged with conducting original educational research leading to a dissertation of practice. Most of our LLC members already worked full-time jobs in education.

By year 2, of 17 original members, only 6 remained.

So long and good luck! Later! We’re out of here!
I've come through these 2 years with an expanded view of literacy...

Whatever we think about an objective reality is built on a social foundation inherited or alternately forced upon us by those who came before!

Languages and systems of meaning—a great kaleidoscopic edifice to which we might contribute a pebble or two, transmuted from what was.

It's not so easy this balancing act between word and image, between a notion of oneself and THE UNIVERSE.
A word relates to consciousness as a living cell relates to a whole organism, as an atom relates to the universe...

A word is a microcosm of human consciousness.

L. Vygotsky - 1934

He might have said the same for an image.
Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) say we associate circles and curved forms “with an organic and natural order, with the world of organic growth...”

All that in an egg!

I shared some of my preliminary research findings at the 60th annual ILA Convention in July of 2015.

ILA changed its name from International Reading Association, to International LITERACY Association. I went through some changes too!
Two years ago, when asked to define "Literacy," I replied, "Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening." Since that time, I have embraced a broader definition.

The "Ascent" of Man
An iconic diagram, offensive to some, overly simplistic to others. Whether human beings emerged from the mind of God or from a star-crossed puddle of primordial enzymes, the story of human consciousness maps to the development of our technology.

Song and Kellogg (2011) viewed our signs, our words and images, as a palimpsest -- an ancient surface from which an original text has been washed or scraped away. Word and image of a younger era may be overwritten, but traces of the earlier texts yet remain.

...Mirrored in the infant's acquisition of her first language.
Help me hunt for my keys!
Hunt? Did you lose them?
I need them. Help me find them.
Okay, I'll hunt.

The social imperative of human language...
Egocentric speech emerges when the child transfers social, collaborative forms of behavior to the sphere of inner-personal psychic functions. [Egocentric speech] is the highly important genetic link in the transition from vocal to inner speech. Vygotsky (1934)

Throughout the long march of human history and across the span of a single, individual human life, the word, the image, the sign, assumes myriad associations...

Now class, everyone find the word "hunt" in your word search.

I see HUNT right there. Easy!

Like a pearl, accreting around a particle of sand.

As "meaning" the word/image exists only in the minds of human agents, contingent upon ever-shifting contexts and social interactions.

How might this knowledge help me in the classroom on Monday morning?

How do I reach my students?

Hey, Mr. Phoenix! Tyrone's gonna be absent. He's in I.S.S. all day. Let me take him his assignment!

Roy! You going to tryouts tonight?

Hi, India!

Sure, I can come in for an interview today!

Wow! Fastest job hunt ever!
As a starting point, the Action Research Method recommends a good dose of self-reflection. I had returned to graduate school in 2013 convinced that I would focus on the written word, that my study would involve the writing process, the student production of traditional, alphabetic print texts. But soon into the 1st semester I was discovering more questions than answers.

An advantage to working in a school setting, or a so-called community of practice, is that one may benefit from the work of others. It turned out that many of my tentative questions had been considered years earlier by ten world-renowned scholars who first gathered as a group to consider “literacy” at a hotel in New London, New Hampshire.
From the time I was in third grade, I was writing and illustrating stories.

During the summer of 1967, I discovered Marvel Comics. I became a fan and a collector. I started creating my own characters and comics, heavily influenced by the Marvel comics I was reading at home.

In high school I emulated the style of late 1960's underground comics artist, Robert Crumb. I created hundreds of comics, many bumping against school standards of content and taste.

This comic, based on a character I had created, made it into the school's student newspaper.
"Reading and creating comics was a major part of my life, a literate practice shared within my high school clique. We considered ourselves 'in the know,' self-exiled, on the fringe of the 'materialistic,' mainstream high school experience."
My edgy, counter-culture comics did not conceal that I was middle-class!

White, English speaking -- privileged...

For high school graduation, my parents sent me to Europe and Africa for 9 weeks.

There was no question that I would attend University of Oregon that fall -- tuition, room and board, all on my parents' dime. One could not take art courses at the university without majoring in the subject; that possibility was never discussed. I parted ways with comics, sketched occasionally, but turned what academic attention I could sustain, toward creative writing and alphabetic print text.

In 1977 with a degree in English, I attended a private college and studied education. Later, I taught high school English in a company owned logging town in the Pacific coast range.

I returned to Portland and got a job in the newsroom of the Oregon Journal. In 1982 I earned tuition and a graduate assistantship at SIU Carbondale. I worked publicity for the university theater. I had some occasion to design posters and artwork with my old cartooning style. I earned an MFA in theater, wrote and produced a half-dozen plays, but comics...? They were no longer a part of my life.
In the late 1980’s I returned to teaching in the public schools. I never looked back.

Occasionally, I would write and draw, but only as a hobby. For 15 years I edited the newsletter of a local comic book fan club in St. Louis. I wrote and self-published several books, wrote and illustrated some children’s stories. I even illustrated a story for a friend.

And comics...? In the last 30 years, I created perhaps 2 or 3 -- to see whether I could still do it! The New London Group’s 1996 article came to me like a shot -- the possibility of bringing comics into my teaching. My eyes had been opened to a global, technological world of multi-modality and multiliteracies!
Heretofore, I had considered only a single language.

A single dialect.

The privileged alphabetic mode of the ruling elite.

Existing without context.

Autonomous.
He might have said the same for an image.
"Whose literacy counts?" Paulo Freire (1970) might have asked as he worked with indigenous populations in South America.

My students' out-of-school technoliteracies, the untapped potential of our shared visual language may help us tame our school's Language of Power.
...Back to the urban public school district where I worked for twenty years, teaching English language arts (ELA) and computer literacy.

Here’s the historic K-8 building where I spent the past 6 years teaching computer applications.

96 percent of our population was eligible for free & reduced lunch. 80 percent of our students were children of color.

The school consistently failed to make adequate yearly progress on the annual state assessment in ELA, mathematics and science.

For the most part the school was filled with bright, curious and energetic children who simply struggled to master the academic language and alphabetic print text valued by our dominant culture.

If we were failing to engage students in the Language of Power, my review of empirical research studies suggested work with comics might be enlisted to address the problem.

Lots and lots of books. Books of every size, shape and level.

Here’s a scene from a faculty meeting held in the school library in the fall of 2013.

But...
These potential obstacles I would attempt to meet and overcome with strategic planning, aligning my proposed research with building and district goals. Considering comics’ genesis it was no accident it suffered (and continues to suffer, in many contexts) from a marginalized status, relegated, at best, to something children practice “out of school…”

But, hey...! It looks as though Space Mike is giving me the “high sign…”

To be continued...

Sorry kids...
I hated that about Marvel Comics! It always seemed like a cheap ploy to get you to buy their next comic!

On the other hand, the practice did introduce the “long form” to comic books, an editorial move that paved the way for “Graphic Novels!”

Look for our issue #2, “The Lit Review: A brief history of comics and teaching,” in early November, 2015! Hope to see you then!
Greetings and welcome to Key Strokes, the "alphabetic print" companion to Classroom Comics! We look forward to your comments, suggestions, and critical reaction to each and every issue of Classroom Comics!

With this premiere issue still in its formative stages it was difficult to get responses to a comic book that had yet to appear in print! That said, some early pages previewed on the classroomcomics.net website elicited reaction from my fellow graduate students, one of our professors and a member of local comic fandom!

Hi all:

Here is a link to the project I am proposing -- www.classroomcomics.net — checking to see whether the link works — would work on it more but am working on the proposal and planning for the ILA convention — I'll present there at 4:45 on Saturday.

See you Friday!

Mike

***

Hey Mike,

The links work really well. More than that, I love the content. I would argue strongly, though my colleagues may not agree, that this plus a bibliography is your proposal. Might think about some page rearrangement to push this forward, beginning perhaps with the panels of page 13. Wonderful, exciting work. If we believe in alternative forms of scholarship, I definitely view this as one of them. This (plus a bib) does exactly what a proposal should do — sets out a problem, gives readers a sense of your "style," shows the methods you will be using. What doesn't it have? It doesn't look like the other kids?

Oh well...)

I would be willing to put my name on the line to send this forward.

Wendy Saul
7/12/2015

I replied:

Thank you so much for your encouragement, Wendy!

All the best,

Mike
7/12/2015

Dr. Saul wrote back:

I am really excited about this project. Perhaps because I am older and not so worried about doing things "properly," perhaps in fact because I have made a kinda great career in not doing things properly, I would love to see you move forward with this. We need to test boundaries.

With that in mind, I would begin with thinking of the next edition as being aimed at teachers, not anyone in the university, and suggest that you see yourself as ready to begin.

[Dr. Wendy Saul]
7/12/2015

Several fellow graduate students in my Literacy, Language and Culture (LLC) community of practice responded to my email. Jerome accessed the classroomcomics.net website and responded via the contact widget.

Subject: Great site  Message Body: Love it -...
7/13/2015

Tamara wrote via email:

Mike,

It is exciting to see your research take shape in this form! I believe this is that transformational teaching that we learned about our first semester. Congratulations!

7/13/15
Jessyca wrote:

Hi Mike!

Truly a unique presentation!! Love it!!

Jessyca

For the past 15 years I've edited the newsletter of a local comic book fan club, founded in 1994 by former Post Dispatch investigative reporter, Bill Smith. On July 14, 2015 I posted the following message on our club's secret group-page on Facebook:

Here's a link to my proposed doctoral dissertation:
www.classroomcomics.net

I welcome any questions, suggestions, commentary, reviews, praise or scorn you care to submit. I'll print selected responses in the "Key Strokes" letter-col pages at the back of each ish. You may use the contact widget at the bottom of the web-site, or send a response via Facebook or email (for more extensive reviews/reactions) to my regular [Internet address].

Bill responded:

Misspelling on Research on the cover, Mike... picky picky.

[Bill]
7/15/2015

To which I replied:

Bill, I appreciate that! Some constructive criticism!
7/15/2015

***

Thanks to everyone who took time to look over the issue #1 pages and respond. Next ish we'll really kick out the jams as we explore the conceptual underpinning of the comics medium, vocabulary acquisition, the recent empirical research into using comics in the classroom, and an historic overview of an American industry that was nearly destroyed in the 1950's during the Senate Subcommittee hearings on Juvenile Delinquency. Until next time!

References

A labor of this scope is based on the scholarship, research and thought of numerous groups and individuals, a fact made evident in our next issue. Those works referenced explicitly in this introductory issue are listed below:


For an extensive look at the last decade of empirical research into the use of comics in the classroom, see my literature review starting on page 36 of the Summer/Fall 2014 issue of The Missouri Reader.

Looking for recommended titles to build a comics library for your district, school or classroom? Check out The Association for Library Services to Children, a division of The American Library Association for an extensive list of titles divided by grade level for kindergarten through grade 8. For older readers, see the ALA’s Young Adult Library Services for more, great, age-appropriate titles!

www.alap.org/yalsa/great-graphic-novels
www.alap.org/alsc/graphicnovels2014

Kress and van Leeuwen's "Reading Images," is a foundational text on the subject of visual literacy.

Not the last time we'll be looking at their groundbreaking work!

And while you're on the Internet, don't forget to drop by our website for your back-issues, new pages, and all the latest developments in our on-going project!

classroomcomics.net

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Literature review?! What's that again, Freddy?!!

Hang on, Space Mike, we're entering the "Distortion Area" (Lee, Kirby & Sinnott, 1968, p. 5).

Traversing the distortion area:
Literature review for an action research study using comics to teach academic vocabulary

Mike Phoenix
Groensteen has been writing about comics for decades! This French comics theoretician is one of the world’s foremost authorities on the subject. Tell us what you think about the notion that the proper unit of analysis in a comic begins with the panel.

Cognitive psychologist, Neil Cohn applies the principles and terminology of linguistics to the visual language of comics. Does he succeed? Read his fascinating book and discover a great deal about linguistics and comics along the way!

Postema looks at the comics theoreticians from Groensteen to McCleod and puts theory into action as she explicates the way comics work through her careful, in-depth analysis of the work of dozens of comic artists. Postema puts it all together.

We’re glad you’re here for issue two, but you can catch issue one at:
http://www.classroomcomics.net
You can also order traditional, "hard-copy" editions in full color at Amazon and Blurb.com.
In a run-down tavern on the edge of town...

Soon...

What'll it be?!

Root beer...?

Say what?

I'm a teacher... ...on the job, ...so...

Root beer, please.

Listen, Mac, I don't care if you're Mahatma Gandhi! This ain't the A and W!

Now, for the last time...

What are you drinking?!

Suddenly, from a darkened corner of the dimly lit saloon, a strange, high-pitched, cartoon-voice sounds out.

I believe the man said...

ROOT BEER!!!
Er... Uh... I was just...
Let me pull-up a chair for you.

I’ll get that root-beer... And would you guys care to order anything off the menu this evening?

Yeah, bring me an extra-large bowl of clam chowder!

You tryin’ to get my goat, spaceman?!!!

Gentlemen, mollusks, please... Remember why we’re here!

Wait a minute... Why are we here?

Yeah! What gives?!!!

Why you, no-good, little...
Freddy, Space-Mike... Calm down...!
I thought you guys might be willing to help me put together a literature review for our readers.

Our readers? Literature review? What's a "literature review"?

Why are you looking at me? I'm a clam! What about you, per'fesser? What is it?

The "Special!"

A delicious "club" sandwich...

Dr. H...?

Seems you're making excellent progress!

Thanks for the sandwich!

Good grief! I don't know what I'm going to do. I was really counting on you guys!

Comics' history. Vocabulary instruction. Empirical research studies of comics in teaching. Visual literacy and comics theory....

Gee... I know a thing or two about comics! I'll take comics history, visual literacy and comics theory -- if that'll help!

Hmmm...
Thanks, Freddy...

Perhaps Space Mike can lend you some technical assistance during your mission?

Whatever...

Soon...

...and we got a great happy-hour! Be sure to tell all your teacher friends!

Back on the street...

Wow!!! There they go!!! Didn't waste any time!

Hope those two get along!

Can't shake the feeling that they cleared-out to avoid the bill... Sure wish I'd hitched a ride with them...

Well, let's see whether I can figure out this map...

24 hours later...

Now, that's an imposing edifice!

Moments later at the registration desk...

He slept like a dead man... It seemed that morning came too early!

Everyone going up.
20 minutes later in the grand auditorium...

It's a packed house!

How many of you have used comics in your teaching?

They can be a great resource to help teach academic vocabulary!

Hello...?
This thing on...?

Hello...?

Gonna be a tough crowd this morning!

Hey everybody, it's me! Dr. Robert J. Marzano!!

You all know my "Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement!"

And who would like to list the Six-Steps of Effective Vocabulary Instruction?!!

I do! I love that book!!! It changed my life!

I would! Me! Over here!

I would, Dr. Marzano.
Introduce the textbook definition of the term with an example.

Yes, that’ll do.

Step number 2: Have the students define the term in their own words?

Very good!
Pst... Hey, Buddy, can you get the next slide up on the screen for me?

Step 3: Students create a non-linguistic representation of the term.

Hey, you’re reading that one right out of my book on page 91! Ha ha! Great! Step #4?

Students periodically engage in activities related to the word.

Right... Next?

Have students discuss the term with each other.

Good! The social component, and Step 6 is to involve your students in games that let them play with the terms. But today, we’re especially interested in Step 3!

Allan Paivio’s dual-coding theory provides a conceptual basis for my call to enlist the student’s non-linguistic representations of the target vocabulary term!

“Human cognition is unique in that it has become specialized for dealing simultaneously with language and with non-verbal objects and events. Moreover, the language system is peculiar in that it deals directly with linguistic input and output (in the form of speech or writing) while at the same time serving a symbolic function with respect to nonverbal objects, events, and behaviors...

Any representational theory must accommodate this dual functionality” (Paivio, 1986, p. 53).

This diagram illustrates how sensory input may be managed by two associated systems within the human brain. Too often, teachers (and textbook authors) rely solely upon Paivio’s “logogens” and verbal processes to teach key terms and concepts.
Allan came up with one heckuva theory!

That's why I insist that my teachers remember Step 3! So important!

For autographed copies of my latest books, let's head out to the exhibitor's hall!

Hey, Bud! You mind turning out the lights? Thanks!

What a charismatic educator! No wonder his book served as the linchpin of my district's academic vocabulary initiative!!!

What are your thoughts on the Frayer Model?

Frayer...? Excuse me?

Frayer, Fredrick, and Klausmeier (1969)?

Foundational work! It demonstrated the complexity of academic concepts, terms, words -- even what we might regard as the simplest of words. You'd think no teacher would resort to the "textbook" approach!
Frayer’s group developed extensive schema for interrogating terms and concepts. Peters (1975) supported the approach in his study of standard textbook definitions and the Frayer Model of concept presentation.

Peters demonstrated that comprehension rates were consistently and significantly higher among both strong and weak high school readers when concepts were developed and organized according to the Frayer model of concept presentation.

Reconsider Song and Kellogg’s (2011) metaphor of the palimpsest: the density and layers of meaning associated with a sign or word, or academic vocabulary term! Now, grasp the fragile nature of understanding embodied in the one-sentence textbook definitions that our students routinely encounter in school classrooms.

So then, where are you coming from with all this? Dr. Marzano (2004) clearly understands the complexity of academic terminology and the classroom students’ need for recurring social interaction with the target vocabulary terms. What’s your position?

The idea of employing comics in an expansion of Dr. Marzano’s 3rd Step is indebted to the notion of multimodality expressed by the New London Group (1996).

**Argument #1:**
"...relates to the increasing multiplicity and integration of significant modes of meaning-making where the textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioral, and so on" (p. 64).

**Argument #2:**
"...we decided to use the term 'multiliteracies' as a way to focus on the realities of increasing diversity and global connectedness... when the proximity of cultural and linguistic diversity is one of the key facts of our time, the very nature of language learning has changed" (p. 64).

An entire pedagogy flows from the assumption that all human meaning is a social construct. Students often bring unique and diverse views of the world into the classroom, views not always valued or acknowledged by the prevailing school culture.

The children of the privileged elite were naturally favored in school systems where the meaning-making tools of their dominant culture became the approved standard.

The factory-model of public education turned out a reliable product for much of the 20th Century.

Changing 21st Century realities of globalization and a post-fordist economy led to fractures in the status-quo.

Streams of labor and management to run a burgeoning economy.
Far from being passive widgets moving along pre-determined tracks to a pre-ordained end, learners in the view of the New London Group (1996) become active agents, designers of their own social futures.

4 COMPONENTS OF PEDAGOGY

- Situated Practice
- Overt Instruction
- Critical Framing
- Transformed Practice (p. 65)

"What we might term 'mere literacy' remains centered on language only, and usually on a singular national form of language at that, which is conceived as a stable system based on rules such as mastering sound-letter correspondence. This is based on the assumption that we can discern and describe correct usage. Such a view of language will characteristically translate into a more or less authoritarian kind of pedagogy" (p. 64).

It makes sense.

It was really some revolutionary thinking.

And it provided a great theoretical structure for organizing the work with my students.

"A pedagogy of multiliteracies, by contrast, focuses on modes of representation much broader than language alone. These differ according to culture and context and have specific cognitive, cultural, and social effects. In some cultural contexts -- in an Aboriginal community or in a multimedia environment, for instance -- the visual mode of representation may be much more powerful and closely related to language than 'mere literacy' would ever allow" (p. 64).

There you go... Back to celebration of the visual mode again!

The visual mode is the driving force in the comics.

The purpose is not to overturn words and alphabetic text. I hope this page demonstrates their utility in what some comics practitioners might deridingly suggest has been nothing more than a page of talking heads!

I have felt curiously "dismembered" since you introduced me to the readers back on page 9...

Words are a great meaning-making resource for those who are able to read and write with them!
In many contexts the alphabetic print mode assumes a secondary role, or may be non existant!

Linguist, cognitive psychologist, and comics theoretician, Neil Cohn (2013), studied the visual languages of Aboriginal people groups.

"In Central Australia, several Aboriginal communities actively use a system of sand drawings for narratives and even casual conversations" (p. 173).

![Diagram of sand drawings](image)

Alphabetic print text has not been the dominant mode of meaning-making in all cultures, nor will it necessarily continue as the single, privileged mode across all contexts in the future.

Prominent New London Group member, Gunther Kress (2000) demonstrates the primacy of the visual modality in his study of 13-year-old science students.

"...what is most significant... is that the substance of their lesson -- the curricular content -- is represented in the image, not in the language. To know what sense these children made of my teaching, what it was they think they saw, what they learned, I need to look at their images, not at their writing" (p. 338).
In the Kress study, the students were engaged in learning about plant-cell structure. The visual mode was predominant, not only in the stages of direct observation... but also through the transformative act of drawing diagrams of plant cells!

"The new texts are transformations of what existed before. In the process, the resources available to these young women have been transformed. At the same time, the makers of the texts are not who they were before: They, too, have been changed as a result of their work" (Kress, 2000, p. 339).

Those 13-year-old girls weren’t the only students of nature to produce transformational work! Without getting into the world of architecture, sculpture and the “Fine Arts” of painting, it’s amazing to recognize how many of the great scientific and technological documents were not “written” but “drawn.”
What about transmediation?

Yeah, what about transmediation...?!  
If you mean moving from one sign-system to another... I'm glad you raised the subject.  
I'm surprised Dr. Marzano didn't bring it up this morning...

Not that he needed to... but the concept of transmediation fits perfectly with our...

...suggestion that creating a non-linguistic representation of a target vocabulary word will help anchor word meaning in the brain... and, that the movement between signs systems, as Kress noted (2000) is, by nature, a transformative, generative, and meaning-producing act!

Tell us more!

Well, then... I...

At the risk of going down another rrr...

With deference to the work of the New London Group (1996), I mustn't leave the stage without acknowledging the contributions of Anne Haas Dyson (1986), a pioneering classroom ethnographer, sociolinguist, and qualitative researcher known for her advocacy of drawing, talk, and the artifacts of children's popular culture used to promote traditional alphabetic print literacy.

... to understand the beginnings of literacy, researchers cannot be interested only in text... we have to look for its beginnings in all kinds of makings that children do. In this way we will begin to understand, appreciate, and allow time for the often messy, noisy, and colorful process of becoming literate" (Dyson, 1986, pp. 407-408).

In her study of 18 kindergarten children, Dyson (1986) followed Vygotsky (1934), maintaining that talk is a major indicator of children's thinking. After Halliday (1978) she developed five categories of talk. She focused on the talk that occurred during drawing...
Dyson focused on the egocentric, task-centered speech identified by Vygotsky (1934).…

Go round. Draw circle. Hand go round and round. I make the color go around.

Dyson identified talk used to seek information…

What color is the bus, Ms. Dyson?

What color do you imagine?!

…personal language used to express thoughts and feelings…

I’m happy just like the big boy on the bus!

In many ways, Dyson anticipates what Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), and others, would refer to as the “motivated” sign (p. 8). No sign or utterance may be understood apart from the context of its use; always situated, always employed as a tool to achieve a particular social end (Gee, 2004; 2014; New London Group, 1996; Kress, 2000; Rogers & Wetzl, 2014; Wertsch, 1991).

…the representational talk that spoke to the actions or state of the created figures and situations drawn by the children.

The big boy is going to school on the school bus. Happy bus. Happy big boy!

…and talk in her fifth category: interactional language used to navigate the classroom setting with peers and others.

May I use the yellow crayon, please?

Yes.

Dyson showed that, over time, children began to add more and more alphabetic text to supplement and then replace and/or represent the verbal speech and drawing that had been observable in the beginning of the study.

Pre-dating the work of the New London Group (1996) by a decade, Dyson references Vygotsky when she states that writing ability grows out of the “entire history of sign development in the child” (Dyson, 1986, p. 382).

Still, when she refers to “literacy” Dyson generally describes traditional, alphabetic text. Writing in 2000, Short, Kauffman and Kahn promote an expanded view.

“We while schools have focused on language, the other sign-systems should be available to all learners” (Short, Kauffman & Kahn, 2000, p. 169).
Short, Kauffman an Kahn (2000) observed students responding to literature across multiple sign-systems. Acknowledging their debt to Siegel (1995) and Suhor (1984), whom Siegel credits with having coined the term *transmediation*, the three authors remind us that...

"This process is not a simple transfer or translation of meaning... instead learners transform their understanding through inventing connections so that the content of one sign-system is mapped onto the expression plane of another... They search for commonalities of meanings across sign-systems, but because each system has different potentials, and there is no one-to-one correspondence, their search creates anomalies and tensions" (Short, Kaufman & Kahn, 2000, p. 170).

de Saussure was a founder of linguistics and semiology, the study of sign-systems. The American, Charles Sanders Peirce was into so much it's difficult to label him: philosopher, mathematician, scientist, teacher. John Dewey was one of his students!

Our interest here is Peirce's critique of de Saussure's analysis of sign functioning.
In de Saussure’s view, language provided the template for the understanding of all meaning-making. He saw a one-to-one correspondence between the “object” in the world and its sign.

Neil Cohn (2013) points out that Peirce did not restrict his definition of language to the verbal/written, but rather broadened his view to include the visual. In his book on the visual language of comics (2013), Cohn provides a diagram of Peirce’s three forms of reference.

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Siegel (1995) in her study of transmediation and struggling math students in an urban alternative school, discusses Peirce’s expansion of the de Saussure model which Peirce found inadequate to account for sign-functioning in other modalities.

No “thing” or “object” is encountered apart from a culturally mediated understanding. When we see a “flower” and say it thus verbally, or draw a picture of it, we are always resorting to culturally mediated resources.

The iconic resemblance of the flower like its verbal counterpart, “f-l-o-w-e-r,” is not understood, does not “mean” on its own, as de Saussure’s dyad suggests. Rather, according to Siegel (1995), in Peirce’s view, this sign or “representamen... addresses somebody. It creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign” (p. 459).

Peirce’s Semiotic Triad suggests that no single sign (representamen) means anything on its own, but always and only in relation to another sign or complex sign (the interpretant) which it calls to mind.

adapted after Cohn (2013, p. 19)

adapted after Siegel (1995, p. 459)
According to Siegel (1995), when learners transmediate, they take the content plane, that is to say the "object" from the natural world, and correlate that with the expression plane, or sign-vehicle, Peirce's representamen. Sounds like you're talking about de Saussure's dyad again!

That it?

It would be, if it ended there, but Siegel continues: that it is from that correlation that Peirce's interpretant arises -- and it is from the interpretant that the learner makes the leap to the new expression plane of another modality.

"...consider what happens when learners draw their interpretations of a written text, whether a story or an expository piece. They must arrive at some understanding and then find some way to cross ('trans') the boundaries between language and art such that their understanding is represented pictorially; it is in this sense that one sign system is explored in terms (mediation) of another" (Siegel, 1995, p. 461).

Here you see where the interpretant of the verbal/written mode "maps" onto the visual modality!

**The sun, an object in the natural world**

**content plane**

**"object"**

**sign/representamen**

transmedion to the expression plane of another sign system

(The NEW expression plane in the visual model)

Transmedion!
While generally accepted that a child's first language is acquired naturally, certain social groupings, communities of practice (such as schools, occupations, and professions) require highly specialized language (Chomsky, 1959; Freeman & Freeman, Gee, 2004, 2014).

In our schools today, English language learners face particular hardship. At the same time, students for whom English is a first language may also struggle when working with academic language. Bunch (2010) distinguished between a student's mastery of basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS), and a student's functioning at a level of cognitively academic language proficiency (CALP).

Teachers strive to re-create real-world situations in the classroom where individuals, working in cooperative teams, are the active agents of their own learning. To the best of their ability and often, given limited time and resources, teachers provide a safe zone of proximal development, or scaffold of activity that allows for students to progress (Vygotsky 1934; Lave 1996).

As we devise opportunities for children to generate mental simulations and engage in simulated practice, we are, nevertheless, confronted by the need for overt instruction (Gee 2004, 2014; New London Group, 1996).

When students are unable to master academic language, when CALP remains elusive, the teacher may consider other strategies.

The interpretants, in Vygotskyan or Bakhtinian terms, are cultural constructs, the layering of meaning that is built-up around the child’s earliest words (Vygotsky, 1934; Wertsch, 1991). For Gee, they may be part of the “mental simulations” preceding action and developing with experience (Gee 2004, p. 49). In the sense intended by the New London Group (1996), they may be part of the arsenal of Available Designs, which are shaped through student agency in Designing and which result in the transformative Redesign.

It is in this sense of positive human agency that mentors and teachers encourage their apprentices and students: to take action, employing mediational tools to create a new utterance, a redesign, a generative and transformative act as the learner gains mastery over the tools of privilege, manifest in the school's language of power. (Lave, 1996; New London Group, 1996; Wertsch, 1991.)

That it?

Ummm... Yes... I think so...

What about comics?

Comics...?!!!
Meanwhile, in an alternate reality...

Literature review?! What's that again, Freddy?!!!

Hang on, Space Mike, we're entering the "Distortion Area" (Lee, Kirby & Sinnott, 1968, p. 5) !!!

We've got to jump back into time, Space Mike! Have you figured it out yet? It's your spaceship, ya' know!

Freddy, I think you press that button!
It worked, Freddy!

We're heading to the offices of Eastern Color. Eastern prints the Sunday supplements for most of the Northeast.

Sunday supplements?

Sunday funnies! Classic newspaper comic strips!

Third shift. Downtime for the enormous presses.

Eastern sales manager, Harry Wildenberg, and a commission salesman, Max Gaines, took a sheet of newspaper and folded it into quarters. They could produce a cheap, saddle-stitched pamphlet of comic strip reprints.
Eastern Color sold these novel “comic books” to Procter & Gamble for use as premium giveaways, and as radio promotions for “Wheatena, Canada Dry soft drinks” and other popular products (Hajdu, 2008, p. 21).

Max Gaines slapped ten-cent stickers on an armload of these books, took them to a nearby newsstand and, returning the next day, discovered they had sold-out!

In May of 1934, the experiment led Eastern Color to produce Famous Funnies #1. It was the world’s first regularly produced comic book distributed to newsstands. The print-run of 200,000 copies sold-out, and Famous Funnies was soon returning 30,000 dollars in profit a month, a huge sum by 1934 standards (Hajdu, 2008; Howe, 2012; Jones, 2004; White, 1970).

New Fun was the first publication to appear with entirely new material, created specifically for the comic book. Wheeler-Nicholson avoided the expense of paying the national syndicates reprint rights. Instead, he paid piece work to inexperienced, young artists, happy to earn any type of income during the height of the Great Depression. The comics were derivative — knock-offs of the established newspaper characters and situations that inspired them, but the comic books sold!

In 1938, Wheeler-Nicholson published Action Comics #1. The lead feature in the anthology title was created by two teen-agers, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster who had worked for Wheeler-Nicholson for several years. They sold all rights to Superman for $130. National syndicates had rejected Superman as a possible newspaper strip. It was Max Gaines who saw some pages, and passed them to the Action Comics editor, Vin Sullivan, for consideration. Superman was an instant hit, but success came too late for Wheeler-Nicholson. Unable to pay his printing bills, his company was turned over to his creditors, Harry Donenfeld and Jack Liebowitz, shrewd, New York City magazine publishers and distributors, and founders of the company that would become DC comics (Jones, 2004).
The success of Superman in Action Comics, ushered in the Golden Age of Comic Books. Dozens of publishers entered the fledgling industry, anxious to capitalize on the popularity of the superhero. The superhero had roots in mythology and legend, in the heroes of the pulp magazines such as Doc Savage and The Shadow. Superman owed a debt to them all, including the Phantom, Lee Falk's superhero who had debuted in the newspaper strips in 1936. Extra-ordinary abilities, a secret identity and colorful costume -- to these Siegel added elements of science fiction and humor -- the formula was exploited in the pages of hundreds of titles to follow.

By 1942, 25 million comic books were being purchased each month, and by one conservative estimate, at least ten children would read every comic book sold -- leading to the biggest reading fad among children in world history (Hajdu, 2008; Howe, 2012; Jones, 2004).

A competing, conservative discourse began in this country soon after the first appearance of the newspaper comics at the turn of the century.

I almost forgot to ask... You talked about the reprints in the comic books. When did the comics begin?

I'm glad you asked, Space Mike! They began in 1896 in the pages of Joseph Pulitzer's New York World.

"Comic books are the direct descendants of the American Newspaper Comic Strip. The first modern newspaper comic, to which all comics ultimately trace their lineage, Richard F. Outcault's 'Yellow Kid,' was created in 1895 for Joseph Pulitzer's New York World" (Phoenix, 2013, p. 1).
Following the exploits of the barefoot, immigrant orphan in a lower east-side New York City slum in both words and pictures, the comic appealed to a mass audience; many were immigrants, or the children of immigrants, all learning to decode texts in a language that was not their own, yet a text of the dominant culture.

At the same time, through the glorious, four-color representation of the Sunday supplement, salted with familiar idioms, cultural artifacts and customs with which the fledgling comic fans could instantly identify, and a visual language available to all, the early comic strips developed a large and loyal following (Jones, 2004; Hajdu 2008).

Pulitzer’s arch rival, William Randolph Hearst of the New York Journal hired Outcault and the Yellow Kid away. Pulitzer hired another artist to continue the feature at the World. Later, Pulitzer hired away Rudolph Dirks, creator of the immensely popular Katzenjammer Kids. Hearst kept the feature running at the Journal with a new artist. Dirks changed the title of his feature to Captain and the Kids. Pulitzer and Hearst, two titans of the New York City newspapers, were the world’s first captains of Mass Communication and the daily record of their struggle, named for the Yellow Kid, became known as “Yellow Journalism” (Robinson, 2011, p. 27).

“In their earthiness, their skepticism toward authority, and the delight they took in freedom, the early newspaper comics spoke to and of the swelling immigrant populations in New York and other cities where comics spread, primarily through syndication (although locally made cartoons appeared in papers everywhere). The funnies were theirs, made for them and about them... ...The comics offered their audience a paradoxical look at itself, rendered in the vernacular of caricature and nonsense language. The mockery in comics was familial-intimate, knowing, affectionate, and merciless” (Hajdu, 2008, p.11).

To the culture’s dominate elites, the color Sunday comics represented a threat to their privileged mode of communication!
In the early years of the 20th Century, the conservative reaction was swift. "The Nation and Good Housekeeping found the Sunday supplements most offensive because they were published on Sunday, the Christian Sabbath" (Hajdu, 2008, p. 13).

In the August 1906 edition of the Atlantic Monthly, Ralph Bergengren called the Sunday comics... "... humor prepared for the extremely dull... a thing of national shame and degradation" (Hajdu, 2008, p. 11).

The Ladies Home Journal ran an article entitled: "A Crime Against American Children" in its January 1909 issue...

"Are we parents criminally negligent of our children, or is it that we have not put our minds on the subject of continuing to allow them to be injured by the inane and vulgar 'comic' supplement of the Sunday Newspaper?" (Hajdu, 2008, p. 13)

The conservative, anti-comic drum-beat was eventually drowned-out by the guns of World War I. By the time the war ended, the comics and the Sunday supplements had re-emerged as unavailable features of American life.

"In the age of digital entertainment, it may be difficult to estimate the influence the early newspaper comic strips and full color Sunday sections had on the public imagination and the national conversation. Even by today's standards, the nationally syndicated comic strip artists at the turn of the century were paid enormous sums, and top creators were the popular entertainment celebrities of their day" (Phoenix, 2013, p. 2).

The decades rolled by, comic books appeared, proliferated, and once again the conservative discourse resurfaced...

...Beloved children's book author and influential Chicago Daily News columnist, Sterling North.

1940: North publishes "A National Disgrace."

The powerful attack came from an unexpected source...
The opening salvo of North’s crusade* was fired from his column in the Daily News on May 8, 1940. “Virtually every child in America is reading color ‘comic’ magazines — a poisonous mushroom growth of the last two years. Ten million** of these sex-horror serials are sold every month... Superman heroics, voluptuous females in scanty attire, blazing machine guns, hooded ‘justice’ and cheap political propaganda were to be found on every page” (Hajdu, 2008, p. 40).

**25 million a month by 1943

*He enlisted teachers in the cause (North, 1940, Childhood Education).

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 with better, though quieter stories. 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’ magazines” (Hajdu, 2008, p. 40).

They were tough words, but once again a World War distracted the nation.

Often with cruel stereotyping, Comic Books were enlisted in the war effort against the Axis powers.

At the conclusion of World War II, GI’s who had purchased so many millions of comic books in PX’s around the globe, returned to a changed nation. Comic books reflected the interests of an older population, exploring new genres and themes. Representative of these changing tastes was William Gaines. His father, Max, who had helped invent the comic book industry had been killed in a freak boating accident in New Jersey in 1947. At 25 years old, William, who had planned to be a high school teacher, took over his father’s comic book empire.
The 1950's were marked by years of national anxiety expressed at its extremes in a climate bordering on political and cultural paranoia. Comic book writer and editor Dennis O'Neil said of those times, "It was McCarthy in the House and Estes Kefauver in the Senate..." (Phoenix, 2013, p. 9).

In 1953 the Senate Sub-committee on Juvenile Delinquency, chaired by Kefauver of Tennessee, undertook a devastating probe of the American Comic Book industry.

Fredric Wertham (1954), conflated the reading of comics with delinquency. Now, largely discredited by the scientific community, at the time, his book was a runaway best-seller.

As early as 1949, spontaneous comic book burnings erupted in cities and towns across the United States (Hajdu, 2008).

William Gaines had transformed the content of his father's comic book company. Critically acclaimed, the line of crime, war, science fiction and horror comics appealed to an older and more sophisticated audience. Many of Gaines' comic books were inappropriate for young children, but the entire comic book industry fell under attack.

His defensive, at times flippant testimony before the Senate sub-committee made front page news in the New York Times, but his appearance only exacerbated the situation. The entire nation had turned against comic books. (Duin & Richardson, 1994; Hajdu, 2008.)

Dozens of publishers went out of business, and more than 800 comic book professionals lost their jobs, many, never to return. The surviving comic book companies huddled together and created a self-imposed regulatory body. "The Comics Code Authority" served as a de facto censor, modeled on the Hays Commission which had policed the movie industry in the 1930's. Without the Comics Code Seal, distributors refused to handle product. With the exception of MAD, which was turned into a black and white magazine and survives to this day, William Gaines' entire line ceased production (Hajdu, 2008).

That's about it.

But isn't there a lot more to the story?

Not really, Space Mike... Not as far as the prevailing discourse is concerned. The national perception of comics has changed little in sixty years.

Not only an industry, but an entire medium of human expression was painted by the same, broad brush.

Then I guess we should head back to the 21st Century.
Freddy and Space Mike are back on their way to 2015...

Sometimes I wish I'd been born into the cinema, or perhaps as a character in a novel, or stage play. A place in a Whitman poem would have been nice...

Then again, all the modes and genres suffered a share of ridicule when they first appeared.

Meanwhile, at the conference...

The state's new online student-assessment software is generating a lot of “buzz.” You wouldn't mind moving your presentation to another venue in the complex would you?

Great! Comics...

Uh... No. That would be fine...

Moments later...

An unconventional venue for an unconventional classroom resource.

A certain poetic symmetry to it, I suppose...
Hey, Mac! Where you want these folding chairs?

We can bring another rack of ten if you need 'em. I'll just need you to sign for these.

Says you need a wall-outlet for a projector... Somebody will be along from AV with a power strip and an extension cord.

Ten minutes later...

Well, uh... Let's see... I was going to review some recent empirical studies where researchers have successfully employed comics in the classroom...

If you missed my presentation over in the auditorium, I shared some theoretical framework behind my interest in using comics to help teach our traditional academic vocabulary... So, uh, for the research studies...

A few more spectators drifted into the cavernous room and took their seats.

I was hoping to share a little history of the comics medium... I, uh, think it's important to understand something of comics' historic marginalization. I mean, my position, the position, perhaps, of thousands of teachers who might consider using comics in their classrooms if not for all the unfortunate, negative associations...

What happened to Freddy and Space Mike...? I thought they were going to help me out...?

Well... Can't wait any longer...
Mike turned-on the projector and began his talk. First off he mentioned the work of Bonnie Norton (2003) who studied the out-of-school community of practice of 34 middle-school students, equally divided among boys and girls who read Archie Comics.

Norton cites Dyson (1996) who suggests that the social events that shape and employ artifacts are essential to the building of significance. Given their marginal status in the world of schooling, comic books may be associated with what Finders (1997) might call the “literate underlife” of schools and communities (p. 25).

The children’s reading practices went unrecognized by the grown-up world, the adults at home and by those at school. Norton warns: “As we become distant from childhood pleasures, particularly of the popular culture kind, our ignorance turns to fear. In order to reestablish control, we retreat to the rituals and practices that are familiar in schooling, sometimes sacrificing a focus on learning and meaning making” (Norton 2003, p. 146).

We naturally acquire our first spoken language. As children we naturally acquire a visual literacy as well. In 2002 Angela Yannicopoulou (2004) studied over 300 pre-schoolers in Rhodes, Greece. She demonstrated that even small children had learned to read the visual conventions of comics. They could distinguish with over 70 percent accuracy whether a person was speaking aloud or thinking (speech balloons/thought balloons) and on the basis of variations in typography alone, could determine whether a character was shouting or whispering.

Yannicopoulou (2004) concludes that:

“Traditional teachers who limit their understanding of literacy to decoding the signs of the written language, must recognize that ‘reading’ had been expanded to reader-viewers who exploit verbal and visual hints in the texts they read.

The challenge of multimodality should change the concept of what ‘reading’ is and how it is taught in schools” (p. 189).

From these two researchers I wondered, “Why not build upon my students’ prior knowledge of this visual modality -- their nearly universal familiarity with the comics format?”
Let's start off with the work of Sean Connors (2013) who used comics in a graphic novel reading group...

Now, my first slide pictures six high school student participants in Sean’s voluntary after-school reading... Uh... What the...? Umm, the projector seems to... I...

Oh no! The projector lamp has burned out!

What am I going to do?

Suddenly...

Yikes!

Oh my!
Often times, we think of a literary event as a physical product: audible speech, a written text, whether traditional print or visual text, or music, dance or some multimodal form such as movies or comics.

In my study I demonstrate how my students employed the affordances of comics’ multimodal text “…as meaning-making resources available to them in the visual design of the graphic novels…” and further, that “… in interacting with the graphic novel’s linguistic design they tended to read in a manner that called to mind Rosenblatt’s (1978) theory of transactional reading” (Connors, 2013, p. 38).

I took the New London Groups’ idea of designing and applied it to an “inward, rather than an outward production of signs” (Connors, 2013, p.33).
The small but appreciative audience listened to Dr. Connors recount his experience using comics in the classroom. Soon...

And so, to sum-up I’d say that my study “Challenges educators to revisit their definitions of literacy and ask whether they are willing to extend that term to include transactions with sign systems beyond written language” (Connors, 2013, p. 49).

Thanks, Dr. Connors!

My pleasure, Mike!

Not so fast you guys! We got plenty more guests on board!

Greetings from Canada! Mr. Fritter and Space Mike invited me along to share some of my research with middle school students using comics in the classroom!

All the way from British Columbia and 2013... It’s Dr. Sylvia Pantaleo!

The four published articles reflect my work with classroom teachers and their middle school students where we all intentionally studied the meta-language of comics and how they may produce meaning. Then I looked at how students used their understandings in the production of their own, original comics. (Pantaleo, 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b)

In three of my studies (2012, 2013a, 2013b), I analyze the student comics through Halliday’s (1978) conceptual lens of the three metafunctions of language: the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual.

I demonstrate how students employ visual affordances of comics such as paneling, color, typography (among others) to communicate meaning!
Here's an example of Myca's (a pseudonym) comic from Figure 1 of my study of fourth grade students' use of paneling. The affordances of paneling which were the focus of my analysis included: "border colors, border styles, intensity, shapes and sizes, and sequencing" (Pantaleo, 2013b, p. 157).

"The jagged border, which was outlined in red, communicates information about the adult cat's personality and his affective responses to his experiences with the kitten in the feline's 'world' (ideational function). The red spiky lines serve to draw reader attention, dramatize the event, and emphasize the cat's attitude 'towards what is being represented' (Machin, 2007, p. 92) (interpersonal function). The salience of this textual element is created through its serrated nature and color, and the spiky appearance of the panel differentiates it... throughout the composition (textual function)" (Pantaleo, 2013b, pp. 160-161).

In my study (2011) 7th graders examined narrative disruption. They explored metafictional devices including intertextuality, parody, stories-within-stories, and characters who directly address the reader/viewer. Students were then assigned to employ a number of the devices in their own, original comics.

That's great, Dr. Pantaleo, but just look who's walking down the gangway now!

I used graphic novels in a classroom of fifth graders to teach traditional elements of literary fiction including point of view, allusion, symbolism, metaphor, mood, flashback and foreshadowing. Using comics to teach traditional academic vocabulary... Interesting...

You bet!

These researchers led me to imagine a study examining students' work creating original comics as a resource for learning high-value academic vocabulary words.

...And you decided to look at state-tested figures of speech.

...Speaking of researchers, here come a bunch more...
Additional comics researchers have soon disembarked the remarkable time/space craft.


Comics provides a common interest for a powerful affinity group that cuts across age, gender and culture.

Our work has brought comics on the verge of the school house door!

Comics’ visual modality provides an excellent scaffold for English language learners!


Comics used successfully with Linguistically and Culturally Diverse students; English Language Learners, Deaf students, cognitively challenged students (Chun, 2009; Danzak, 2011; Gomes & Carter, 2010; Hecke, 2011; Ranker, 2007; Smetana, Odelson, Burns & Grisham, 2009; White, 2011)

Thanks for all the help, Freddy! I couldn’t have done it without you!

No, problem! Space Mike and I were happy to help!
As a parting gift, Freddy the Fritter and Space Mike have arranged a meeting with Mike and some of the world’s foremost authorities on comics theory. From around the globe they sit assembled: Scott McCloud (1993), Thierry Groensteen (1999), Charles Hatfield (1999, 2005, 2009), Barbara Postema (2013), and Neil Cohn (2013).

“Who is it that we are waiting for? Are we waiting for someone...?”

It’s been great catching up! We obviously still have our differences... But...

Comics is a language!

The image is the proper unit of analysis!

Why are we arguing about this?

Because comics is merely a genre of a much broader visual language!
15 minutes later, Mike showed-up at the restaurant door...

Seeing you all here, at one table... It's like a dream come true!

It's no dream, Mike... No "imaginary tale!"

I have so many questions!

I gotta get back to my cognitive psychology lab!

You've all influenced my thinking! It all started with...

Scott McCloud! You introduced the concept of CLOSURE to the analysis of the gaps between comic panels. Your classification of six fundamental panel transitions has proven invaluable!

Thierry Groensteen! No one has surpassed your theory of comics' arthology, the articulation of panels across the comics' page, or hyperframe, and the totality of panel images across the multi-frame of long-form comics!

Merci, et bonsoir, Michel!

Charles Hatfield! You were one of the first comics theoreticians to critique McCloud's work in 1999. Your own reasoned analysis of alternative comics serves as a model of comics criticism.

Cognitive psychologist and linguist, Neil Cohn provides a brilliant lexicon of comics' visual conventions on his journey toward an over-arching theory of comics as a genre of visual language.

Barbara Postema provides a stunning overview of comics theory from McCloud to Groensteen and weaves a spell-binding analysis of narrative structure in dozens of ground-breaking, modern comics.

Suddenly, at the door...

Now, wait a cotton pickin' minute here, Mr. Phoenix!

Sir, do you have a reservation?

Dr. HP!
Just what do you think you're doing with these people?

I'm trying to put some of their great but often conflicting ideas together into some kind of...

Synthesis?

Even an eclectic tool box.

"Tools?" Tools for what purpose?

...to analyze my students' comics. I need a method...

"Method...?" Did I hear you say "method"?

! |

Methods?

In a lit review?

! |

These two scallywags can just put your guests back on that space ship! This is no place for any discussion of "methods!"

The space ship is set on auto-pilot to return you home. Now, let's move along people. Nothing to see here!

We're all disappointed, Fred!

Sorry, Scott!

Well, Mike... All things considered, it hasn't been a total waste of effort!

Celebrate completion of your literature review!

Thierry recommended this excellent '96 Cabernet from Bordeaux!

Take care of that, and I'll see you out front on the road with the spaceman and the clam!

I invited them up for coffee!

TO BE CONTINUED...

Sorry kids... I hated that about Marvel Comics. It always seemed like a cheap ploy to get you to buy the next issue!

On the other hand, the practice did introduce the "long form" to comic books, an editorial move that paved the way for "Graphic Novels!"

Look for our issue #3, "Methods: Reflections on Action Research in a Comics Study" at the start of 2016. Hope to see you then!
Hello, and welcome to “Key Strokes,” my send-up of the 1960’s “letters to the editor” columns of many Silver-Age comic books.

As reactions to my online and print comics come in, I will continue to print comments, suggestions and criticism in these pages, the “traditional, alpha-text” portion of our project.

* * *

Local comics writer and creator of Headmetal Comics wrote on Facebook:

**Christopher Michael 10-24-15**

Mike, my fellow Saluki, Issue #1 is an awesome and truly entertaining introduction. I will be reading #2 online in the near future. Great work.

**Mike Phoenix 10-24-15**

Thanks, Chris! #2 is nearly complete... About a week or two, then on to #3!

**Christopher Michael 10-24-15**

Nice. I’ve already shared it with some of my teacher friends.

* * *

One simple way to respond to these comics is to fill-in the contact widget located at the bottom of the website page devoted to this project, located at: www.classroomcomics.net

I look forward to your responses!

* * *

The remaining pages of this issue’s “Key Strokes” are devoted to the references section of “The Lit Review.” In addition, photographs are referenced by the page numbers upon which they appear.

Given the constraints of my multimodal platform, I have done my best to adapt to the guidelines of the Publications Manual of the American Psychological Association in this comic book presentation of my Literature Review.

---

**References**


Photographic Images

Page 13

Sir Isaac Newton explores the phenomenon of color in his diagram
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Galileo’s astronomical drawings
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Leonardo da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man
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Isaac Newton’s telescope
Diagram of Isaac Newton’s reflecting telescope, from the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society, 1672. Image courtesy of the Royal Society of London. Source: Royal Society of London

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Leeuwenhoek microscope

Model of the double helix from the work of Watson and Crick.
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1930’s rotary press
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Famous Funnies #1
see also Gerber vol 1 page 248

Action #1
see also Gerber vol 1 page 9

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Child with stacks of comics
https://2warpstoneptune.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/comics-1946.jpg

Children in hallway reading comics

Children reading comics on a bench
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Children reading comics on a sidewalk
Kids reading comics, 1947 © Ruth Orkin
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Yellow Kid and the Dog Catcher

Yellow Kid and the Mad Dog
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Pulitzer and Hearst as the Yellow Kid
image courtesy the Library of Congress
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Ladies Home Journal, January 1909
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Sterling North at his Royal Typewriter
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see also, Hajdu, 2008, unpaginated insert plate

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Superman 17
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see also Gerber vol 2 page 657

Captain America 1
see also Gerber vol 1 page 135

Batman 18
see also Gerber vol 1 page 88

William “Bill” Gaines at 25-years-old
see also, Hajdu, 2008, unpaginated insert plate

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Senator Estes Kefauver
Estes Kefauver | Mar. 12, 1951, Time Magazine Cover
http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19510312,00.html

Seduction of the Innocent (cover)

Fredric Wertham

Comic Book Burning
St. Patrick’s Academy, Binghamton NY, 1949
http://cbldf.org/2012/06/1948-the-year-comics-met-their-match/
see also, Hajdu, 2008, unpaginated insert plate

The CCA Stamp

***

“Approved by the Comics Code Authority” from Fantastic Four Annual 6, page 5.
Stan Lee, Jack Kirby and Joe Sinnott. © Marvel Comics.
Gerard Jones (2004) tells the story of the birth of the American comic book. Sean Howe (2012) picks up the story and focuses on the birth and development of Marvel, the company that would one day challenge the supremacy of DC Comics! And let's not forget David Hajdu's (2008) story of the anti-comics crusade. All these books are meticulously documented but read like an adventure!

1968. Reed and Sue have their baby, the first child born of a superhero couple in the comics! Lots of action on the way, not to mention crossing the distortion area!
Wait for me, you hooligans!

Special Bonus Pin-Up
“The Road to Methodology”
featuring Space Mike, Freddy the Fritter and Professor “H”
Comics in the 21st Century Classroom
visit us at: classroomcomics.net

Any lesson plans in this issue? You think these things would come with lesson plans. What about black-line masters?

Would it kill ya' to add a couple work-sheets for the kids?!

Through a glass, darkly:
Methods of an action research study using comics to teach academic vocabulary

Mike Phoenix
Cochran-Smith and Lytle are top authorities on action research. Their foundational volume, “Inside Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge” is must reading for teacher researchers. Authoritative and practical, the book provides a roadmap for those considering the action research method!

“This drawing is not a comic...” Ha, Ha! That Scott McCloud! What a sense of humor! In his ground-breaking masterpiece, “Understanding Comics,” McCloud argued that a comic had to contain at least two panels...

In the April 1999 issue of “The Comics Journal,” comics scholars and theoreticians pile on McCloud and his work. Beatty, Cwioklik, Hatfield, Spurgeon, Witek and others weigh-in with their critique and analysis.

McCloud answers them all! And not one of these critics fails to acknowledge McCloud’s lasting contribution and influence.

My own thinking about methods of analysis begins with McCloud!

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Our narrative thus far: "I have been searching for a way to engage my students -- a resource we might employ in the classroom to master academic vocabulary -- vocabulary words tested by the state and highly valued by our school community."

How do I reach my students?!
In the emerging literature of autobiographical comics, Hatfield (2005) argues that the obvious artifice of comics lends itself to heightened reader involvement and skepticism; the stance of the artist in relation to the reader invites “ironic authentication” for the truth claims represented in comics’ texts (Hatfield, p. 125).

“The representation of time through space, and the fragmentation of space into contiguous images, argue for the changeability of the individual self -- the possibility that our identities may be more changeable, or less stable, than we care to imagine” (Hatfield, 2005, p. 126).

Action research foregrounds the researcher’s autobiography (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Hendricks, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2005).

“The syntax of comics—specifically, its reliance on visual substitution to suggest continuity—puts the lie to the notion of an unchanging, undivided self, for in the breakdowns of comics we see the self (in action over a span of time) represented by multiple selves” (Hatfield, 2005, 126).
If we were failing to engage students in the Language of Power, my review of empirical research studies suggested work with comics might be enlisted to address the problem.

Here's a scene from a faculty meeting held in the school library in the fall of 2013.
I thought you guys might be willing to help me put together a literature review for our readers.

Good grief! I don’t know what I’m going to do. Wasn’t really counting on you guys.

Transmediation!

I’m a packed house!

He slept like a dead man… It seemed that morning came too early!

What are your thoughts on the Proper Model?

What a charismatic educator! His speech has ebook. http://book.scribd.com/... my district’s academic vocabulary initiatives?

He’s no dream Mike... No “imaginary tale”!

I have so many questions!

Shoot, buddy! I gotta get back to my cognitive psychology lab!

You’ve all influenced my thinking! It all started with...
Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) trace the development of teacher action research and its historic connection with the national Gateway Writing Project and teacher inquiry!

I believe I had encountered their work in the summer of 1995 when I was part of the Gateway Writing Project at my local university, and again in 1999-2000 when I took a graduate course in reflective practice.

As a practicing teacher, I saw my work in publications produced by the Gateway Writing Project and the university. I designed the covers for both publications never thinking I’d be holding them in my hands today, some 20 years later...

I designed this one in 2000, but dashed it off with clip-art.

What strikes me as ironic is the choice of visual metaphor that inspired the designs: The road and the mirror.

Now, as a teacher conducting "formal" action research with a protected class -- my 8th grade students -- I had no choice but to embark on our journey with a formal plan.

... a "road map," if you will...

In view of the reflexive nature of the action research method, a simple "Road" analogy, at least in terms of a direct route from "A" to "B," proves inadequate!

Behold...
Action research is iterative. In conducting my classroom study, as a practicing public school teacher engaged in university-sanctioned research, I enacted “the spiraling, reflect, act, evaluate process of action research” (Hendricks, 2013, p. 17).

Such a strategy has consequences when it comes to publishing within the traditional dissertation framework.

In the two dozen, peer-reviewed empirical research studies cited in my literature review (Phoenix, 2014), not a one strays from this time-honored path of intro, lit review, methods, findings, and discussion.

As I key these words on Thanksgiving Day, 2015, I look back at my original plan for this dissertation. If I knew then, what I know now, well....

I foresee a series of five or more comic books.

Each “ish” focusing on a respective topic of the established, 5-chapter dissertation...

The issues published serially over the next ten months.

When a practitioner discovers a better way to achieve a result, those findings influence her ongoing methods. Hence, at the onset, there is no pre-determined path, no fixed “roadmap” in an action research study.

The traditional five-chapter dissertation supports the type of “straight-forward” research where, for instance, a treatment is administered, and results are reported. Action research methods, at least at the tactical level, may evolve as the teacher researcher reflects on her findings and adjusts her methods in the light of new realities.

Again, the traditional five chapter “report” does not support this approach. One cannot fully and honestly separate the ongoing methods from the findings which inform their development.

Of course, like all scholars, the action researcher preserves a precise record of the steps she took over the life of her project. At the conclusion of the study, she may retrace the steps she took along the way.

A visual corollary might involve a trail of metaphorical switchbacks.

...or the spiral path suggested by Hendricks (2013).
You will separate methods from findings!!!

Dr. H!

You’re making a habit of this.
I haven’t forgotten the last stunt you pulled!*

*Method...? Did I hear you say “method”?

No need to go off the rails! Present your over-arching strategy: simply refer to the methods in your Institutional Review Board application!

And here! You might take another look at this!

Call me in a couple weeks and we’ll do lunch!

Address your findings in chapter four!

*See Issue 2: The Lit Review
Am I over-thinking the process? After all, every researcher has to organize her narrative. If she hides behind a curtain, she might enhance the illusion of "reality."

Not an option in teacher action research...

We're active agents in the story...

Life is a play... Life is a game... However I organize the narrative, I recall Holly, Arhar and Kasten (2009) who warn: "...the more we critique our work, the more we can come to see injustices done in the name of helping " (p. 37). We maintain no illusion of pure objectivity in action research.

We recognize power relations in society...

A first step toward mitigating their influence is to admit their existence.
I don't know why I'm feeling so guilty about doing this...

As though, somehow, I ought to take the time to find a visual metaphor...

Oh, well... Here it is. Page 2. Seems a lifetime ago I sent this in for review.

Methods!

This is it, all right... The old methods section!

Comics in the Classroom - Charles Phoenix, revised 10-4-14

1. Introduction

GENERAL PURPOSE of the study.

The purpose of my study is to document the use of visual literacy using a comics medium to teach academic literacy. Specifically, six Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) tested figures of speech.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS: "How does the use of comics promote 8th grade students’ mastery of academic language with a focus on figures of speech?" and "How do I best structure my classroom lessons, behavior, and teaching/learning to attain optimal student learning using the comics resource?"

II. Methods, Procedures and Role of the Participants:

In this mixed methods action research study, I will document routine teaching and learning practices across a three-week unit of teaching academic vocabulary through comics. As a middle school teacher at _______, I teach a computer literacy course which includes 8th grade middle school students. I teach the course in the language with a focus on figures of speech. As part of this course, students will learn academic language associated with the Missouri MAP tested figures of speech. I will be using comics to help students learn the vocabulary and the language used by the creators of the comics. For example, I will use a pre- and post-test of student understanding with the tested figures of speech and student familiarity with the conventions of the comics medium. As students are generating literature courses will participate in these classroom activities. Only students whose parents consent to have them of the surveys, video-taped classroom interactions, classroom presentations, and original comics as part of the data set.

In an effort to improve my own teaching of academic vocabulary through the medium of comics and to help answer the research question "How does the use of comics promote 8th grade students’ mastery of academic language with a focus on figures of speech?" I will be examining my own classroom teaching practice. My primary research question is predicated on how I will use comics in my classroom, behavior, and teaching/learning to attain optimal student learning using the comics resource? I will invite several colleagues to observe my classroom instruction. This, too, is a normal part of teaching life in my building/district. In past years I have video-taped lessons in order to observe my behavior and improve upon my teacher practice. I will ask the observers to provide me with written feedback and will also have discussions with them to gather additional insights about my teaching. These records will become part of the data set.

I will invite all of my 8th grade students (up to 105 students) to submit these artifacts of their learning for the data set. I will send home a consent form explaining to parents the specifics of the study. Those students whose parents/ guardians return a consent form will then be invited to participate in the research and be given an assent form on file. The assent form on file will be considered as one of the participants. Those students who have both consent and assent forms on file will be considered as participants. Those students who have both consent and assent forms on file will be considered as participants. Those students who have both consent and assent forms on file will be considered as participants. At the end of the computer literacy course, I will ask students to complete an electronic survey and or paper survey with their interactions as part of the research. In addition, I will interview a sub-sample of the students in the interviews so I can learn more about their learning in the comics medium. I will generate this sub-set of students from those students participating in the study who have completed the comics medium. I will generate this sub-set of students from those students participating in the study who have completed the comics medium. I will generate this sub-set of students from those students participating in the study who have completed the comics medium. I will generate this sub-set of students from those students participating in the study who have completed the comics medium. I will generate this sub-set of students from those students participating in the study who have completed the comics medium. I will generate this sub-set of students from those students participating in the study who have completed the comics medium. I will generate this sub-set of students from those students participating in the study who have completed the comics medium.
As I mentioned before,* I thought this is the type of text I’d be studying in my doctoral program...

I don't really expect you to read this entire document...

...although you're welcome to. I can wait...

In her course on classroom ethnography, one of my professors stressed the importance of keeping careful records. I wrote to her on September 7, 2013, sharing an "ah ha," moment.

In an article by Lewis and Fabos (2005) I'd been reading in my sociocultural literacy course, I came upon a semicolon. Something so simple as a "wink icon" opened the floodgates in my mind: Icons, pictures, comics -- they might all be considered part of literate practice!

August 27, 2013 at 10:22AM.

I wrote it down.

Later that fall our sociocultural literacy professor asked us to write an extensive literature review of peer-reviewed, empirical research.

...it's standard in any field you may wish to enter...

By the Spring of 2014 I was confident that I could conduct some kind of study of my own with the subject of comics.

At the time, I was fairly certain I would enlist adults as my research participants, thereby eliminating the concerns and extra effort of submitting my proposal for full review before the Institutional Review Board.

It was the professor in my course on cultural and linguistic diversity who convinced me otherwise.

You are a teacher, yes?

Well, yes, but...

Work with your students. You see what I'm saying?

I guess you're right, Doc...

I wrote mine on the use of comics in the classroom. Over the holiday break my professor encouraged me to revise my review. She suggested I seek publication.

If any of the other teachers are interested in comics!

I'm sorry, Mr. Phoenix. Were you looking for a particular title? I can check with another school if you like...

Given comics' historic marginalization* and traditional exclusion from the literate practice of public schools, I was concerned that my large, conservative urban school district would balk at the notion of "comics in the classroom."

Have some basis in fact?

No... That's O.K., but thanks...

I've said it before, and I'll say it again*: as of 2013, the library in the school where I conducted my study had no comics, no "graphic novels" in its inventory.

*ish #1, pp. 17

*ish #2, pp. 21-27

*ish #3, pp. 25-26
The fact that as late as 2014 Internet searches containing the word "comics" were blocked by district technology filters, added to my concern.

Meanwhile, the more I read, the more convinced I became that comics was (and is) "a form of writing and reading" (Hatfield, 2005, p. 34).

Dallacqua (2012) had students read and discuss graphic novels to learn about traditional elements of literary fiction, including point of view, allusion, symbolism, metaphor, mood, flashback and foreshadowing.

Back at work in my classroom I wondered how the work of those researchers might connect with what we were already doing in my district and my building.

I considered our academic vocabulary initiative, our school based "word of the week" program and our district's endorsement of Robert Marzano's Building Background Knowledge and his Six-Steps of Effective Vocabulary Instruction* (2004).

We'll expand upon Marzano's 3rd Step, to "create a non-linguistic representation" of the target vocabulary word (Marzano, 2004, p. 96).

...but instead of any old "non-linguistic representation..."

We'll use comics!

*ish # 2, pp. 6-7
Very well, then... but which words to use? I've spent years teaching English, Communication Arts, Language Arts, English Language Arts... Hmmmm...

Dallaqua’s students looked at literary terms...

Spring 2014, my house.

Something to do with literature...

...literature or writing...

A couple weeks went by and I was back at work, visiting a new teacher who taught 7th Grade Language Arts...

How is your after-school drama club going?

Just great, Phoenix!

There they were, spelled-out in colored dry-erase markers on a 4 by 8-foot piece of shower wall.

These were the same six figures of speech enumerated in our Missouri English language arts grade level expectations (2008) and tested on the high-stakes annual assessment, terms referenced, more generally, in the Common Core State Standards Initiative (2010).

Not only had I taught these terms through traditional means as a middle school ELA teacher, but I recalled having studied them in 1967-68 as a 7th grade student!

My Language Arts teacher used multimodality and dual coding in her teaching long before Marzano and Pivio... Yet, thanks to them all, I had an outline for my study.
I was confident that with its connection to Marzano’s district-sanctioned “Six Steps of Effective Vocabulary Instruction,” its promotion of state-tested vocabulary terms, and a wealth of published empirical research demonstrating the efficacy of comics as a teaching and learning resource -- my proposed study was positioned to overcome possible district objections.

Still, there was one more feature I might turn to advantage...

...That would be my choice of method!

It was probably no coincidence that all the members of my university cohort were required to take a summer-long course in the action-research method.

Afterall, we were each of us working toward a doctorate which would require us to complete a dissertation of practice.

As an “insider” I would conduct research with my own students in our classroom -- a teacher, action research study.

Teacher-researchers and authors Holly, Arhar and Kasten (2009) pick-up on the metaphor of teacher action research as a journey in the title of their book, “Action Research for Teachers: Traveling the Yellow Brick Road.”

The authors write, “Action research (AR) in the context of teaching is a form of inquiry designed to improve our teaching by using professional (informed) eyes to observe our own practice” (Holly, Arhar & Kasten, 2009, p. iii).

...to improve our teaching...

Now, there’s a phrase to reassure my district’s decision makers.

Just as my proposed research would have to pass muster with my university Institutional Review Board, it also required approval from my district’s Department of Research and Evaluation!

Near the close of the 2013-2014 school year, while I mulled these ideas through my mind, I asked a couple students in my 8th Grade Computer Literacy Class to draw some comics...

Create the comic on your computer or just drawn it on a piece a paper. Try one on the word “simile…”

That’s the one that uses “like” or “as!”

...Could you each make a one-page comic on a figure of speech?

Sure! Sounds fun!

Include a definition and an example or two. If someone reads your comic he or she should learn all about that figure of speech!
Encouraged by the work of my 8th grade students, I went to my building principal.

...so I would work with my 8th grade classes next year. We’d spend three weeks on a unit using comics to teach the figures of speech.

Do I have your support?

Yes!

I had once mentored a new, first-year teacher.* He earned a masters in teaching, became our building’s teacher in charge, and served as the school’s academic instructional coach. I told him about my proposed study.

Would you be interested in collaborating? You could observe lessons, talk about my strategies, give me feedback...

Sure... No problem!

I went to our building’s art teacher with whom I had worked for the past five years. We’d worked on cross-curricular projects with our students. I asked whether she would collaborate with me on my research study.

It sounds interesting. I’d be happy to help!

Great! Thanks, Ms. Alsace.*

*Mr. Xavier, a pseudonym

To protect the true identities of my participants, I seriously considered rendering them with superhero domino masks.

I worried the masks might undermine the serious nature of this work, and hence will rely solely on my application of pseudonyms.

DATA SOURCES?

My data includes audio and video recordings of class sessions and interviews with students and collaborators.

My teaching journal included daily classroom observation notes, reflections on my lessons, photographs of my classroom and a detailed audit log.

*audio cassette tape

Hendricks (2013) notes “Collaboration allows educators to gain multiple perspectives on critical educational issues” (p.79).
Mr. Xavier shared the data from both formal and informal observations of my classroom practice.

"How can 100% of the students be engaged in the discussion without shouting out?"

"Can the assignment be broken into smaller chunks?"

Other data included teacher-designed teaching materials...

The official study protocols included pre and post test instruments on comics and figures of speech, a pre and post survey on attitudes towards comics, and student peer-review protocols.

A final, official protocol, exit interview questions, formed the basis of audio-recorded interviews with student participants.

"Bertaux (1981) had argued that those who urge educational researchers to imitate the natural sciences seem to ignore one basic difference between the subjects of inquiry in the natural sciences and those in the social sciences: The subjects of inquiry in social science can talk and think. Unlike a planet or a chemical, or a lever, 'If given a chance to talk freely, people appear to know a lot about what is going on' (p. 39)" (Seidman, 2013, p. 8).
Let me apologize for these narrative disruptions. Even here my "mini-comic" disrupts the regularity of my 9 panel breakdown, a visual rhythm established six pages ago on page 11.

An element of this panel image appears to break through the panel's defining frame into the adjacent gutter.

It's about time that I brought the discussion back to comics!

With all my talk of journals, protocols, lesson plans, interviews and verbal text...

I have yet to mention my most significant data source, the more than one hundred and twenty original comics that my two groups of students created in the classroom!

My students and I talked about comics. I interviewed students about their experience creating comics, but I will also turn to an examination of the comics themselves to help understand their meaning-making affordance.

At the close of this issue I'll draw upon current comics theory to present some methods of analysis used to interrogate my students' comics texts.

Narrativity is coded in the fabric of the comics' panel breakdown!

Debriefing with peers and study collaborators, producing a thick description of my research, and triangulating data sources are all steps I have taken in the study design intended to enhance validity as outlined by Hendricks (2013).

Interviews with adults & students

teacher

journal

student comics!
As themes emerged in the data from one week to the next, my use of the inductive, constant comparative method of data analysis helped inform daily practice and subsequent iterations. Employing a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) permitted course-corrections over the life of the study.

Data (both verbal and visual) was deconstructed using open coding and then interrogated for emergent themes with axial coding in a grounded theory approach to data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

My understanding of verbal texts is enhanced by the critical discourse analysis work of Rogers and Wetzel (2014). Gee (2014) provided support in the use of discourse analysis as I examined my identity work as a teacher, as a graduate student embarking on his first formal research study, and also as a method for understanding my students' comics.

This report on my study of comics in the classroom is complicated by my interest in answering two research questions.

But I'm also interested in good teaching!

My over-arching interest has been in the use of comics to promote student mastery of academic language.

To illustrate the plan-enact-reflect method of action research, I'll retrace four of the metaphorical paths I traveled over the life of my study. Each “path” represents a particular issue or problem of practice. We'll follow each in a series of ever-ascending switchbacks.

One might envision the research trajectory as an ascending spiral.

Reading “Action Research for Teachers: Traveling the Yellow Brick Road,” (Holly, Arhar and Kasten, 2009) I see no reference to the 1939 MGM production of “The Wizard of Oz.” The film depicts Dorothy's starting point as a radiating spiral.

In each successive iteration of the study, the researcher revisits the particular issue at a higher level of understanding.

In this visual corollary, the researcher re-encounters the issue or topic or problem of practice along a radius, "in a widening gyre."

Unlike the falconer in Yeats, she experiences no loss of control, but an enhanced and broadened range of understanding.
On September 16, 2014, my school district approved my research proposal, contingent upon the "OK" from my university's Institutional Review Board. That approval was awarded on October 29, 2014. I sent notice to my district's Division of Evaluation and Research, and the district granted official permission to proceed on December 2, 2014.

I had been teaching middle school computer literacy for over a decade. I typically taught a homeroom class of students for ten-weeks, an academic quarter. With that teaching schedule, I reached every student in the building over the course of a year.

I planned to position my three week study following the unit on desktop publishing. An object-based environment, bringing together the units on alpha text and visual image, the desktop publishing software seemed to serve as a perfect launch-point for a medium that blends the two.

Ironically, in all my years of teaching my computer application units, I had never considered using comics in the classroom.

Over those ten weeks I covered touch-type keyboarding, word-processing, computer graphics, desktop publishing, spread-sheets and multimedia presentations.

Anxious to begin, I set my sights on the 2nd semester of the 2014-2015 academic year!
In January of 2015, back from Winter Break in the classroom with my new group of 8th grade Computer Literacy students, I distributed the course syllabus and handed out the parental permission slips and student consent forms.

In about a month we'll spend 3 weeks using comics to help learn some figures of speech. With your permission and the permission of your parents, I may be able to use what we learn to help other teachers.

In March of that year, I repeated the process with yet another group of 8th grade students.

In about a month we'll spend 3 weeks using comics to help learn some figures of speech. With your permission and the permission of your parents, I may be able to use what we learn to help other teachers.

The action research method enabled me to reflect on teaching at the tactical level, to experiment, to improve practice from day to day. Running the study over time with two separate groups of participants permitted review at a strategic level!

From the vantage of hindsight, I can review the past year and describe in this study numerous strands of activity and interest, some of which led to deadends, or paralleled the life of the study but were of little import. Other pathways became increasingly significant, took on a life of their own and emerged as thematic highways which I now can retrace in comics.

Eureka! So that's what happened!

Four strands or recurring themes that evolved and came immediately to mind include:
- Initial Planning, Lessons, Expectations, and Teacher and Student Discovery.
- I remember interviewing Ms. Alsace on Friday, January 23, 2015. I had button-holed her at the metal detector that morning. She agreed to meet me in my Computer Lab on our combined lunchtime.
- Thanks, Ms. Alsace! I need this interview for my critical discourse class next week!
- Happy to help you, Phoenix. See you at lunchtime!

* 1-23-15 happened to be a rare, faculty & student “dress-down” day.
The session lasted from 1:10 pm to approximately 1:40 pm. I shared the protocols and a general overview of the study. I asked Ms. Alsace about her experiences using comics.

I left for the weekend with renewed confidence.

That weekend, at home I transcribed the half-hour interview.

“I was just going to reference this book by Scott McCloud called, ‘Understanding Comics.’”

Phoenix: I was just going to reference this book by Scott McCloud called, “Understanding Comics.”

I broke up the text into small meaningful phrases and imported them into an Excel worksheet and assigned each row a unique identifier. Next, I assigned parent and child codes to the snippets of text: codes like McCloud, student comics, closure, reluctance to draw. When I had completed coding, I sorted the rows by code and ended up with several over-arching, re-occurring themes.

I’ll apply a “countif” formula and tabulate the themes by frequency of occurrence across the universe of 683 lines of the interview!

The most startling discoveries lay ahead in the next few days as I began simply to re-read the interview and think about what Ms. Alsace had been saying.

“I wasn’t even listening to her! She came up with all these great ideas, and I missed them!”

Too busy pushing my agenda to hear!!!
I had planned to spend a week talking about comics, studying comics through the lens of Scott McCloud’s text on comics theory. In reviewing the Alsace transcript (lines 652-663) I began to rethink that strategy...

“I thought I was going to do a full week and I had to be like all this ‘technical stuff and I’m reading these books on these theoreticians and it’s like -- even this book...”

“Maybe I don’t need that much?”

In retrospect, I was influenced by my sustained review and analysis of my interview with Ms. Alsace.

I took heart the simple line...

“Maybe you could give them a few comics?”

I took action. In place of my full week studying comics, I brought in a number of graphic novels, reprints of classics, even modern comics donated by a local comic book store. On the second day of the study (following the first day spent completing pre-tests and surveys) I put out the items across seven large tables in the computer literacy room.

My critical discourse analysis professor suggested a name: “Gallery Walk.” Way outside my comfort zone.

For a decade my students had always worked at computer stations, shoulder to shoulder, along the perimeters of the computer labs I had configured. I was learning through my work with multimodality that “meaning” extends beyond the verbal and the visual texts of comics. It is coded in the clothes we wear, the way we move and the spaces we design for our students to inhabit.

The students would pair-up and move about the tables looking at the various comics, filling-out this form I devised.

*(Taylor, 2014)*
From my initial plan of spending a week talking about comics... to my conversation with Ms. Alsace... to MY REVIEW of that conversation where I actually HEARD her suggestion...

Sustained reflection led to the Gallery Walk. My students took part in the activity on 2-3-15, the second day of our study. Evaluating that experience, I saw that they’d been forced to spend too much time simply filling-out the titles of the comics they were reviewing at each of the 13 stations.

I redesigned the form, adding the titles for use with my 2nd group of students.


Yes, a real improvement in practice! But I hesitate to leave you with the wrong impression, particularly for my friends who have never set foot in a middle-school classroom...

—a staged photograph, 3-31-15, following the Gallery Walk and the end of class, I asked students to turn from the camera to conceal their identities
Sometimes, despite all our planning and best intentions, a "higher reality," or, perhaps, a competing reality may intervene. My first obligation in the classroom was to deal with my students, first and foremost as individual human beings, and so my re-imagined gallery walk had to take a temporary, "back-seat."

My analysis reveals my preoccupation with how to introduce the comics...

"Because they're going to pick up stuff as they go on..."

"Throughout."

"Yeah!"

80 lines of the conversation were devoted to my concern over my students' potential reluctance to draw.

"How much should I devote to like -- talking about comics? How they work? Maybe not a lot? I was thinking that in the beginning I would spend a week doing that."

"Maybe just... Maybe a day."

"Wow!"

...And so it was with the pilot study in February of 2015, following the day of pre-testing and the initial gallery walk. I turned my student participants loose drawing comics!

They're actually drawing comics in the classroom!

The initial feedback was a great response, was able to get around and give feedback Smile is a

We start fresh every day. The disappointment in the March 31st entry, is counterbalanced by the optimism of the April 1st entry. The text mirrors two more important strands that developed over the course of both studies: Lessons and Expectations.

Like the "initial planning" strand, these two themes also saw their inception, way back in that interview with Ms. Alsace on January 23rd!
Yes! I admit it! It was a great feeling -- A great feeling that may have clouded my judgement!

A year of dreaming, planning, rehearsing in my mind's eye that one glorious moment -- suddenly realized in that basement lab.

It's alive!

I reminded my students to go to my website to access online resources where they could look up the figures of speech.

You'll find definitions and examples online.

Now, let's get back to working on those comics!

The students all visited the web resources and took a look at the six figures of speech under study.

...And when you finish, get back to work on your comics!

I encouraged the students to read the first 14 pages of Chapter 3 on the subject of panels and "closure" in Scott McCloud's book, "Understanding Comics" (McCloud, 1993, pp. 1993, 60-94).

I had a PDF of those 14 pages on my teacher website.

You may answer some of the questions I put together on the chapter for homework.

Now, let's get back to work on our comics!

By the conclusion of the pilot study, I looked back over my journals, Mr. Xavier's observation notes, and my student's work and realized my focus had almost been entirely centered on the production of the student comics.

I'd lost sight of the first two steps of Marzano's Six-Step* process -- simply "leaving it to the students" to review the alpha-text definitions and examples on line.

Moreover, those lessons on the conventions and techniques of comics had been either open-ended or too complex.

I was engaged in AR, the "idea of spiraling": act, evaluate, reflect, act, evaluate, reflect... (Hendricks, 2013, p. 11).

The pilot ended with post-testing on February 24, 2015. The second study began on on March 30th. In that month I revisited the New London Groups Pedagogy of Multiliteracies (1996, p. 65).*

My students would benefit from additional Overt Instruction. In pulling back from my initial plan to "spend a week talking about comics," I had gone too far. I re-designed lessons, and added a half-dozen more relative to the visual affordances of comics.

In my zeal at seeing the pilot students drawing their comics, I had overlooked the need to provide alpha-text instruction in the six figures of speech. I designed alpha-text assignments, covering Steps 1 and 2 of Marzano's system and broke it into manageable parts so as not to overwhelm my new group of students.

*(Marzano, 2004, p. 91) also see issue #2 pp. 6-8
*see issue #2 pp. 10-11
I maintained some awareness that I had “pulled back” from “heavy-handed” overt instruction. I was fascinated by my students’ innate visual literacy and their out-of-school, cultural familiarity with the comics form.

The following excerpt is from my journal entry for 2-9-15, day 6 of the pilot study.

Things worked out in a fairly positive way. I had loaded assignments online and had intended to spend the day having my study participants look over the alphabetic text of the figures of speech definitions and examples one would expect in the first steps of the traditional Marzano approach. Recall I had given no instruction in the figures of speech. I had said merely to write a comic that would communicate the meaning, definition and sense of the respective words to a reader unfamiliar with the vocabulary. I had noticed several students were still lacking in their understanding...

...This online assignment would make the definitions and examples apparent. Students went to the web page and downloaded the assignment and resources. The assignment was very much a mirror of the pre-test, only in this instance, they had online resources to explore the target words which the majority of students quickly pursued.

The discussion of student and teacher expectations...

...the “thematic highway,” if you will, that I first mentioned on page 20...

...winds all the way back...

...to my initial meeting with Ms. Alsace, video-captured on 1-23-15!

Now, let’s not push that mad-scientist trope too far! Heh, heh...

Psst... Look it’s that comic-book guy!

Shhh... Hey look you guys, it’s him! Tee hee...
So, each one of these words is going to have a comic strip to it?

Yeah.

Okay.

And I thought I'd let them choose. So, I'm hoping that each kid will put together three --

Three weeks?

All six?

Yeah.

No, not all six. That we meet five days a week for three weeks.

Not all six.

Like three or four.

Oh, yeah.

I mean, in a way--

--So, they'll be doing a comic strip in a week?

Okay.

Don't you think?

And I was just... Yeah.

And I was just wondering if...

Suddenly.

Mr. Horton (a pseudonym)!

Please get your room back in the classroom!!

A moment later...

I lost my train of thought...

Never got it back...

In that initial pilot study, I never did settle on an exact number of comics to require from the pilot students...

* the following 8 panels of dialogue derived verbatim from Alsace Phoenix transcript, lines 399-422
I came away from the pilot study somewhat dismayed by the low gains on the post test of figures of speech.

Upon scoring those pre and post tests I found only a 36 percent gain in the participants' knowledge (measured as a composite score) of six figures of speech at the conclusion of the pilot.

In a paper written for my spring semester class in critical discourse analysis (Phoenix, 2015), I note in a section on limitations that:

My failure to state an explicit number of comics that would be required for successful completion of the “unit on comics” undoubtedly led some students to under-perform. Had all the students turned in a required one-page comic on each of the six, state-tested figures of speech, I would have had 96 comics.

“My naïveté as a new researcher left me spellbound that my student participants had returned, (collectively) fifty, full-page comics. This represented a wealth of data, but, as I have learned since, fell short of having each student create a non-linguistic representation of ALL six of the state-tested figures of speech.”

“It is a curious position, as a teacher-researcher having conducted an action research study, to cite ineffective teaching as a limitation of one’s own study.”
I had framed my study and the use of comics as a pedagogical "treatment" as an expansion of Marzano's (2004) third step of direct vocabulary instruction. As a colleague recently reminded me, I was not carrying out all six of Marzano's Six-Steps.

True, I stopped at the third step, creation of a "non-linguistic representation." It should have come as little surprise that the students experienced only slight gains in the pilot study, or even gains in the second round.

Since the pilot, I have completed the second round of the study, scored and tabulated the results of the pre and post tests and note a significant 104% gain in the composite score.

I am inclined to state that my use of comics demonstrated modest success, although I must also conclude this gain is a reflection of more effective teaching, of lessons learned through the reflexive, action research approach. In the second study I came to terms with my expectations and made them clear: one comic for EACH of the six figures of speech!

Returning to my secondary research question, I asked: "How do I structure my classroom lessons, behavior and teacher/student activity to obtain optimal student learning using the comics resource?" I have gone a long way to answering that question.

My primary question remains open: "How will the use of comics promote 8th grade students' mastery of academic language with a focus on figures of speech?" That question cannot be fully answered in a percentage of gain on a standard paper and pencil post-test.

I must look deeply at production of the students' work, their textual artifacts: the comics themselves.
"Midway upon the journey of our life
I found that I was in a dusky wood;
For the right path, whence I had strayed was lost"
(Dante, Inferno, Canto 1; Illustrated by Doré).
The difference between a series and a sequence.

In my continuing studies of comics, I’ve learned that our “discovery” was nothing new to comics theoreticians, but it, the distinction, came to us in the classroom as a new concept.

In my journal entry for February 9, 2015, I noted in my conversation with Cecilia:

“...Strung across the page with the unifying title and definitions, the comics functioned as a series, not necessarily as a sequence...”

This was a conceptual distinction in comics that became increasingly important over the life of the pilot, the second study and throughout my subsequent work developing methods of analysis.

Like my other AR “highways,” I can trace my first professional conversation about “how comics work” to my interview with Ms. Alsace, and particularly, to my multimodal analysis of that interview.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Stamp/Line #’s</th>
<th>Verbal/Nonverbal Behavior</th>
<th>Video Freeze Frame</th>
<th>Multimodal Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3:59 45</td>
<td>Phoenix: Soooo, without further ado...</td>
<td></td>
<td>Genre: Documentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Closing the book, Phoenix slides it directly toward Ms. Alsace.</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>Discourse: comics theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Style: Phoenix presents the text nonverbally in an “aggressive” move that causes Ms. Alsace to sit back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:01 46</td>
<td>Phoenix: Can you tell me a little bit about your background?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Genre: Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Phoenix leaves the book, in the exact center of the table between them, and leans back, arms open.</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>Discourse: The teaching background of Ms. Alsace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Style: Phoenix sits back, arms open, as he asks his question, while the book remains visually salient, a cohesive marker, a barrier/bridge between them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:17 136</td>
<td>Phoenix: That qualifies, at least by his definition.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Genre: Teacher/instructor -- rhetorical and expository</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Phoenix reaches out, and touches the book, the first time anyone has touched the book since Phoenix last touched it at the 3:59 minute mark when he pushed it toward Ms. Alsace.</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>Discourse: comics theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Style: Cohesive marker, Phoenix reinforces his verbal statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:22 195</td>
<td>Phoenix: ...so the books, when they</td>
<td></td>
<td>Genre: Teacher/instructor -- rhetorical and expository</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Phoenix reaches out, takes hold of the book and pulls it back to himself. He flips the book, so the spine is on his left.</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>Discourse: comics theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Style: Cohesive marker, Phoenix reinforces his verbal statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:26 196</td>
<td>Phoenix: ... publish them in albums, they are, in our way of thinking. backwards.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Genre: Teacher/instructor -- rhetorical and expository</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Phoenix opens the book flips through it with one hand.</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>Discourse: reading conventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Style: Visual prop. The text artifact functions as a visual aid in a demonstration of right to left reading conventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:29 197</td>
<td>Phoenix: But here, do you think they’ll be able to navigate from left to right?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Genre: Interview, collaboror</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Closes the book and leans on the book with his right elbow and continues to talk and listen. His left elbow remains, resting on the book, until the 11:11 mark.</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>Discourse: teaching and learning pedagogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Style: Cohesive marker</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A lot of information may be coded in an image, what in comics is called a panel.

Needs... gulp... More butter!

Multimodal discourse analysis was useful in my approach to interpreting the data embodied in my half-hour videotaped interview (Taylor, 2014).

More soda!

What most struck me was my reliance upon Scott McCloud's book, *Understanding Comics*, (1993). Not so much, or only limited to the "message" or "meaning" of the text, but to the artifact's physicality.

By turns, I employ the book as a touchstone, to reinforce my authority as a comics "expert," as a fetish which I page through nervously, at time unconsciously. I use the book as a prop, turning it upside down, to demonstrate how Japanese Manga is read from right to left and "back to front."

I use the book to draw Ms. Alsace into our collaboration, asking her to read a key passage of the text, from chapter 3 dealing with McCloud's discussion of closure.

It was McCloud who began the discourse of comics theory. Central to his argument is the concept of closure. The mind, "fills-in" the gap between one comics panel and the next.

The human mind bridges the "gutter" between the two panels in this classic excerpt* from McCloud's chapter on Closure, subtitled, *Blood in the Gutter.*

In her theory of the reading transaction, Rosenblatt (1978) spoke of the reader's active role in bringing meaning to a text. McCloud's concept accounts for reader engagement in closing the gaps from panel to panel. Sipe and Brighton's (2009) work with young children and the page-turns in picture books, mines a similar interest.

* (McCloud, 1993, p. 68)
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Video Freeze Frame</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
</table>
|                     |                           | ![Video Freeze Frame](image1.jpg) | Genre: Read aloud  
Discourse: comics theory  
Style: comics authority, cohesive marker |
| 23:07 470           | Phoenix: ((Reading from the McCloud text)) “Here in this limbo of the gutter...” *Phoenix completes the reading on closure from the text, his left hand on the page.* |
|                     |                           | ![Video Freeze Frame](image2.jpg) | Genre: Read aloud  
Discourse: comics theory  
Style: comics authority, cohesive marker |
| 23:23 480           | Phoenix: The human mind completes the image |
|                     |                           | ![Video Freeze Frame](image3.jpg) | Genre: Discussion  
Discourse: comics theory  
Style: comics authority, cohesive marker |
| 23:26 482-485       | Ms. Alsace: =Like reading between the lines=  
Phoenix. =Yes!=  
Ms. Alsace: =and inferring=  
Phoenix: =“Inferring.” That’s perfect!  
*Ms. Alsace adopts the text.* |
|                     |                           | ![Video Freeze Frame](image4.jpg) | Genre: Conversation/discussion  
Discourse: comics theory  
Style: comics authority, cohesive marker shared by both |

As I began my study with the pilot group, my understanding of comics theory depended almost entirely upon the work of Scott McCloud.

My students and I were using the terms "series" and "sequence" to distinguish between the two types of comics we were encountering in the classroom.
Suddenly, from the darkened auditorium.

**BRAVO!**

I see now, that from your quite rudimentary understanding of comics theory you and your students went on to use your notion of a great, supposed dichotomy between series and sequence.

And you were amazed when you saw the same two “types” of comics begin produced, quite naturally...

...by the students of your second group.

At the conclusion of your second study you began to look at your data. You developed a hypothesis, that the students who produced comics of your “sequence” variety would show higher post-test gains on figures of speech, than those students whose predominate production were comics of your “series” type.

You painstakingly coded the comics by salient “narrative features” such as “characters appear across multiple panels,” “dialogue,” multiple character interactions...

A grand data-base, all designed to test for a correlation between high test scores and a high degree of your hypothetical “narrative quotient”!

And what did you find?

What did you “discover” after all that work?

No correlation...

Come again?

No correlation. Students who drew comics of the “series” type did just as well, or just as poorly on the figures of speech post test, as those who created comics of the “sequence” type.

Of course there was no correlation!

“Narrativity” is part of the fabric of the comics’ hyperframe!

By long-established convention the Western eye is drawn from left to right, top to bottom.

You were drawn onto the siren rocks of the panels’ iconic surface codes!

Had you more thoroughly assimilated McCloud’s analysis of panel to panel transitions and reconciled his work with Groensteen’s theory of comics’ iconic solidarity, you might have spent your time more profitably!

*(Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006)*

*(McCloud, 1993; Groensteen, 1999/2007)*
Why so glum...?
I don't know.
I suppose I thought... I hoped to be further along...

Along...
Along where...
To the end.

Don't be discouraged. You've learned that both a "series" and a "sequence" encode narrativity in the panel layout.

And remember. They are both "non-linguistic representations."

That's true, Dr. H!*

Truth...? As much as we may apprehend -- cobbled together from all these motivated signs....

Well, let's put a brave face on it then, shall we, Mr. Phoenix?

You've done a reasonable job recounting your final AR "highway." From your initial conversation about comics with Ms. Alsace you've doubled back at an "advanced" level with you and your students' classroom discovery of your so-called "series" & "sequence..."

You headed out again and operationalized the comics data in your analysis of the texts created during your pilot study.

You evaluated the data and found no correlation with the post-test scores. You reflected. Re-read and pondered Kress and van Leeuwen, Postema, Cohn, Groensteen, even McCracken himself!

Even now, returning to your students' comics, the comics created by BOTH groups, you review over 120 comics with the benefit of new tools and understanding. Even since you began this comic book, you read Hatfield (2005) and discovered his inspired analysis of the "four tensions that are fundamental to the art form" (p. 36).

*(Marzano, 2004; Pavio, 1988; Short, Kaufman & Kahn, 2000; Siegel, 1995)
I was looking at the "content!" Operationalizing the codes in the panels... But I should have been looking at the empty space, the empty space between the panels!
By convention, the comics reader understands that she is called upon to mentally bridge the gaps between the panel frames.

McCloud (1993) categorizes panel transitions into one of six types, including: 1. moment to moment; 2. action to action; 3. subject to subject; 4. scene to scene; 5. aspect to aspect; 6. non-sequitur* (pp. 70-72).

Even Cohn (2013) (who argued against McCloud, Groensteen and others, that comics is not a language unto itself, but merely a genre of a broader visual language) employs McCloud’s transition types, tabulating their occurrence by artist.* Variety of comic (for instance: mainstream superhero & alternative graphic novel) and culture (for instance: American & Japanese).

These transitions are characterized by the type of inference or imaginative leap suggested by the adjacent panels.

Now, armed with a new method of analysis, I can look back and see how the classroom comics that my students and I identified as the “sequence” variety, relied heavily on transitions 1 and 2: moment to moment and action to action...

...Whereas the panel transitions in our comics of the “series” variety were predominantly of types 3, 4 and 5: subject to subject, scene to scene and aspect to aspect.

There exist other analytical frameworks for viewing and understanding comics.

For the purpose of my study those items included speech balloons, thought balloons, whisper balloons, narrative boxes, motion lines, and impact stars.

Cohn’s (2013) discussion of “Peirce’s three forms of reference” provided my students and me with an invaluable lens with which to analyze and discuss our comics (p. 19).

Cohn develops a complex theory of visual language grounded in cognitive psychology and the frameworks of traditional, verbally-based linguistics. In his book on comics, Cohn (2013) offers a theoretical “visual lexicon” and identifies familiar conventional “signs” or, more formally, his “closed-class lexical items.”

Of course, there is a debt to Halliday (1978) whose three meta-functions of language were shown to apply to comics by Pontaleo (2012, 2013b). My study is indebted to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) whose analysis of the visual layout in magazines is a perfect compliment to Groensteen’s (1999) iconographic solidarity and his concept of comics’ spatio-topical system. The shape, area, and site of the panel is critical in the comics’ visual landscape and the signifying tension between page breakdown and layout (Hatfield, 2005).

*McCloud, 1993, p. 75

FIGURE 2.6 The tripartite structure of carriers.

*In Cohn illustration (Cohn, 2013, pp.34-35)
To quote good old Dr. H:

"Narrativity" is part of the fabric of the comics hyperframe.

I will also benefit from narrative inquiry and analysis as I interrogate visual texts with methods first developed in the verbal domain (Abbott and McCutcheon 2001; Labov, 1997; Riessman, 2005; Rogers and Wetzel 2014).

I will move forward with a case-study approach, looking at the work of a half dozen of my students. I will revisit our work in the classroom, analyze student comics and hear from my students in their own words. Again, as Hatfield (2005) with his view of the essential tensions at play in comics, I will undertake a close, critical reading of the student texts in a fashion similar to Hatfield (2005) and Postema (2013) in her "Narrative Structure in Comics: Making Sense of Fragments."

Early in this issue, I used findings to demonstrate how I enacted my AR method. As I more fully present my findings (in the forthcoming issue "Findings") I should like to have more to say about my methods. My goal in this dissertation is not have the last word on comics but, to the extent I am able, to present the system of comics in a coherent way; it will be useful to bring up key concepts as I present and discuss the student work. True, that approach will bring a little talk of methods into my issue/chapter on findings.

I take a cue from Gee (2004) who suggests an effective learning principle is to give information to students "just in time" (p. 74). In my illumination of my student comics, that "time" will be when the reader is best served by the introduction and use of a particular, new concept from "the ninth art" (Groensteen, 1999, p. 20).

Tide's going out.
Epilogue:

A spaceship lands, and the Merry Mollusk is soon joined by a familiar figure.

*see ich #2: The Lit review, p.3.

Still later that afternoon.

Greetings, my little friends! We’ve reached the rendezvous point at land’s end!

I got called away to battle aliens in the future. Sorry, I’m late.
I guess he got tired of waiting for us. Well, he’s on his own now.

I wonder how far along he’s managed to get?

Maybe in a few weeks we’ll take the spaceman’s ride out for a spin? Drop in on our new researcher to see how he’s doing?

In the meantime...

I know a nice, little bistro in Southern France...

NEXT: FINDINGS
Hello, and welcome to “Key Strokes,” my send-up of the 1960’s “letters to the editor” columns of many Silver-Age comic books. As reactions to my online and print comics come in, I will continue to print comments, suggestions and criticism in these pages, the “traditional, alpha-text” portion of our project.

As I put a wrap on Issue #3, I look back at the correspondence I’ve received relative to my project. Apart from two, 3rd-party printing companies that accessed classroomcomics.net, with commercial offers to print “at a low, low cost,” I have received no alpha-text reactions to my first two comics beyond those already appearing in “Key Strokes.” That said, some VERY IMPORTANT correspondence from my university graduate school came through the Internet relative to my dissertation proposal. That all-important note is reprinted at the top of the opposite column.

* * *

12-6-15
Greetings:

Attached is my current thinking about a “final product.” It expands a bit on the research paper. I would like to somehow work my comics into the final product, perhaps as an appendix. I plan to reference some of the meaning making affordance of the comics and could reference the comics/visuals I created if they were included in the same place/work. Very similar to my original conception of the dissertation in practice product from this summer. I would work on the alpha text article/essay/intro in Nancy’s class while I work on the comics (issues #4 and 5) on the side.

Mike

* * *

12-9-15
Dear Charles,

I am pleased to inform you that your dissertation proposal has been approved by the Graduate School. I wish you the best as you move forward with your research.

Best regards,
Wesley Harris
Interim Dean of the Graduate School

* * *

12-9-15
CONGRATULATIONS, Mike!
Dr. Hushy

* * *

12-9-15
Dear Dr. Harris:

Thank you very much for this welcome news.

Sincerely,
Charles “Mike” Phoenix

* * *

12-9-15
Thank you, Nick... I am very happy tonight! A great sigh of relief and back to the books.

Best,
Mike

* * *

On December 10th, I received several responses relative to my note of 12-6-15...

* * *

12-10-15
Hi Mike

I think this looks like a great next step in your process. Can’t wait to see it bloom next semester as well!

Singer

* * *
Hi Mike,

I know we have had this conversation before so I’m going to revisit it here: why can’t the comics be the final product and anything else, like the article, be ancillary? Just a thought.

Nick

** **

12-10-15

Comics can absolutely be the final product as far as I’m concerned. What (or if) Mike does anything in addition is up to him.

Dr. Singer

** **

My thanks to Dr.’s Husby, Saul and Singer, for holding my hand through the long process of working-up a research proposal and seeing it to completion. Of course a special thanks goes to Dr. Harris of the Graduate School, too, for giving me the all important “green light” on my research.

At the close of 2015, I went shopping on Facebook for reactions to my Classroomcomics. I got lots of congratulations and support from many friends and acquaintances, for which I am truly grateful. That said, I still have not read anything specific to the comics themselves. Consequently, the “lively criticism and debate” I imagined for this column is given over, merely, to the references, which follow.

Finally, along with the thanks given to those above, I must thank my anonymous school district and its Division of Evaluation and Research, and particularly its Director who granted permission to proceed with my research study with comics. By way of apology, I note that many of my district’s technology division’s restrictions on Internet searches containing the word “comics” have been lifted. I am seeing more and more instances of comics being used in my district’s schools.

That my district is adopting a broader view of “literacy” is everywhere apparent today; the use of comics in the classroom and interest in research studies such as the one documented here are among only two of many encouraging signs of progress.

Mike Phoenix, 1-2-16

** **

References


**Student Gallery Walk of Comics**

*Conducted on 2-3-15 and 3-31-15*

**Artifacts Annotation and Bibliography**

1. Prince Valiant (Fantagraphics’s volume 6 of the full-color reprints of Hal Foster’s Sunday pages from the classic action/adventure covering the years 1947-1948)

2. Understanding Comics (Scott McCloud’s foundational and controversial treatise on the system of comics presented in comic format)

3. Krazy Kat (a retrospective collection of George Herriman’s Krazy Kat – Sunday pages and daily newspaper strips from the early 20th century with an introduction by e.e. cummings)

4. Homo Ragno (a reprinting of Spider-Man, Hulk, and Daredevil stories in a comic for an Italian speaking audience)

5. Asterix (reprint in translation of one of the hugely successful albums of European comics featuring the comedy of Asterix of Gaul)

6. Pride of Baghdad (based on true events, this photo-realistic comic follows the story of a pride of lions, and other animals, that escaped into the city during the United States bombing of Iraq in 2003)


8. Flash Gordon and Jungle Jim (color reprints of the classic Sunday pages by Alex Raymond from 1934-1936)

9. Owly (a wordless comic by Andy Runton)

10. Bone (a collection of reprints of the first issues of Jeff Smith’s independent comic from the early 1990’s).


12. Fantastic Four (a comic book magazine, volume 3, number 1 from 2012

13. Little Nemo (16 x 21 inch, full-color reproduction of the Sunday pages of Windsor McCay’s classic fantasy covering the years 1905 through 1910)
Figure of Speech — Pre-test

Write a definition and two examples of each of the following figures of speech.

Example: **Oxymoron** An oxymoron is a figure of speech that puts two opposite words together to form its meaning. *A* He was happy hurt. *B* Those politicians are real fake.

1. **Hypobyne**
2. **Stere**
3. **Metaphor**
4. **Hyperbole**
5. **Onomatopoeia**
6. **Alliteration**

---

**Gallery Walk Bibliography**


I did not make the point explicitly in the text, but I wanted the multiplicity of panels in the medicine cabinet images to demonstrate comics’ ability to simultaneously present multiple views of self— an affordance unique to comics texts (and mirrors).

Completed images as they appear on page 1 and 2.

A sketch based on memory and the photo reference images.
Determined to create images based on getting up in the morning and confronting the multiplicity of identity revealed in the image(s) of the bathroom medicine cabinet. I had in mind a “hall of mirrors” effect, but found I had only fragmentary schema to construct such a visual representation on paper. Like many comic book artists (and illustrators generally) I sought refuge in homemade “photo references.” My wife, Rebecca had a good laugh. “What are you doing, now?”

This issue’s epigraph, from 1 Corinthians 13:12, suggests the difficulty of obtaining a “clear picture” of ourselves. This line resonated with the triptych of my downstairs bathroom medicine cabinet and Charles Hatfield’s chapter on “Irony and Self-reflexivity in Autobiographical Comics” (Hatfield, 2005, pp. 128-151). Observing oneself through multiple frames/panels seemed a great visual metaphor for the AR method.
More official protocols and the first “lesson” designed for the second study group.

6. Comics, comic books and graphic novels do not belong in serious classes like math.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral (not sure)</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

7. I have no interest in making my own comics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral (not sure)</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

8. Making comics is a good way for students to show what they know about a subject.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral (not sure)</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

9. You have to be a really good artist to make good comics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral (not sure)</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Pre-Study Survey. Part Two: Briefly answer each of the following questions.

1. If you ever look at comics, what kind of comics do you read?

2. If you ever got comics, where did you get your comics, or how do you get them?

3. Describe your general attitude toward comics.

---

**Peer Review/Critiques of Figures of Speech Comic**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comic Title:</th>
<th>Author:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

REVIEWER NAME

Mark the box that represents your opinion. Complete follow up with your comments on page 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>More Work</th>
<th>Acceptable</th>
<th>Outstanding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

How 1: Demonstrates understanding of the comic work.

How 2: Demonstrates understanding of the target figure of speech.

Pronunciation: Oral and visual improvement of the entire comic is initiated and complete.

Panel: Sequence, orientation, clean and easy to follow.

Title of Comic: The title is written in a clear, distinct, and appropriate manner.

Title Legs: The title legs provide a clear “first impression” of the figure of speech.

Typography: Type is clear and contributes to the meaning(s) of the comic.

Alphabetic text conventions: Spelling, punctuation, capitalization and grammar of alphabetic text is clear and accurate.

Comic visual conventions: Use of comic conventions such as word balloons, thought balloons, narrative boxes, motion lines, etc. is clear and supports the overall meaning of the comic.

Comic visual representations: The use of visual “graphics” is clear, appropriate, and supports the overall meaning of the comic.

Figure of speech 1: (the target word).

Figure of speech 2: (the definition).

Figure of speech 3: (the example).

Figure of speech 4: (visual support or graphical text).

Overall Effect: The reader can make the entire comic with a clear understanding of the target figure of speech.

---

**Figures of Speech**

Define simile.

A simile is a ______ that ______.

Write two (2) complete sentences that contain an example of a simile.

Example: He ran like a cheetah.

1. __________

2. __________

---

**Comics**

Comics is a visual sign system that uses images to communicate information, tell stories, influence people.

Comics are a sequence or series of images to communicate.

The images are almost always contained in a PANEL, defined by outline or frame, and set off from other panels by a gap, space or DIVIDER.

Use these three panels as a sequence to show a comic.
Additional lessons and materials designed for the second study group.

Name: __________________—— DO NOW —— 4-2-15

Figures of Speech:
Define personification.
Personification is a ______________ that ___________.

Write two (2) complete sentences. Each should contain an example of personification.
Example: The bee went buzz in the garden.
1.) ____________________________
2.) ____________________________

Comics:
In addition to images, comics also use written language — words — to help communicate, tell stories, and influence people.
From the word "type" like in "typewriter" we get the word "typography". That means the way the letters look, are shaped and are produced. "Typography" is actually a whole field of study, and is an important part of comics. People choose to be able to easily "read" what you write.
If you write in manuscript, plan out what you are going to say so that you have space.

Write clearly, and if you use the computer to key your words, use a large size type, no smaller than 12 points.

A B C D

In the panels above, draw an (A) narrative box, (B) word balloon, (C) thought balloon, and a (D) sound effect.

NAME 1
NAME 2

1. Cosmic Survey — For each comic you survey, read at least a page and write down on this paper your reaction to the comic. What is the title of the drawing? Grammar? (Like a photo? Abstract? Like a cartoon?) Does the comic tell a story? What kind of story? Really think about the comics and write down your thoughts.

2. Understanding Comics
3. Kitchen Kat
4. Homo Ergo
5. Asterix
6. Police of Baghdad
7. American History
8. Flash Gordon and Jungle Jim
9. Dino
10. Marvel Masterworks: Fantastic Four
11. Fantastic Four (comic book magazine)
12. Fantastic Four (comic book)
13. Little Nemo

Name: __________________—— DO NOW —— 4-6-15

Figures of Speech:
Define metaphor.
A metaphor is a ______________ that ___________.

Write two (2) complete sentences. Each should contain an example of a metaphor.
1.) ____________________________
2.) ____________________________

Comics:
Comics use established visual notes, or CONVENTIONS, to give information. METION lines indicate pathways for various objects.

In the following panels draw
1.) A person in the cold and use motion lines to indicate SHIVERING.
2.) (Draw a dashed HUSTLING across the panel from left to right.
3.) (Draw pieces of popcorn POPPING out of an open pot on a stove.

METAPHOR SHAPE

Complete this Venn diagram comparing contrasting "simile" and "metaphor."

Name: __________________—— DO NOW —— 4-7-15

Figures of Speech:
Define alliteration.
Alliteration is a ______________ that ___________.

Write two (2) complete sentences that contain an example of alliteration.
Example: Seven seagulls stood by the seashore.
1.) ____________________________
2.) ____________________________

Comics:
Comics use established visual notes, or CONVENTIONS, to give information. METION lines indicate pathways for various objects.

In the following panels draw
1.) A person in the cold and use motion lines to indicate SHIVERING.
2.) (Draw a dashed HUSTLING across the panel from left to right.
3.) (Draw pieces of popcorn POPPING out of an open pot on a stove.

1. ____________________________
2. ____________________________
3. ____________________________

51
Additional lessons designed for the second study group and the official exit interview items.

NAME ___________________________  4-5-15

DO NOW — Log in — access Google Chrome — in the browser type www____________________
go to > teachers
go to > Mike Phoenix
go to > comics studies
go to > ONLINE Figure of Speech Resources for Comics Study

Define each of the following and write 2 examples for each:
SIMILE

ex 1
ex 2

METAPHOR

ex 1
ex 2

ONOMATOPOEIA

ex 1
ex 2

Exit Interview Questions for the Participant*:

(Open-ended questions intended to encourage the participant to talk openly about his or her comic. Its meaning, the underlying concepts and ideas employed, the qualities of speech and language used, and the character of the comic.)

1. Where did you get your idea for your comic? Tell me about that.
2. What is your favorite part of your comic? Why?
3. What is your least favorite part of your comic? What?
4. Tell me what things you might do differently?
5. I see you chose to include a narrator (or, chose not to use a narration at all). Tell me more about that decision.
6. Talk to me about the visual conventions you used in your comic.
7. You seem to be telling the reader about _____________ (the figure of speech this topic subject). Tell me why you chose that figure of speech.
8. What is it about that figure of speech (the choice selected) that made you want to work with it in your comic?
9. I see that you chose to tell a traditional story (or, I see that you chose to tell a traditional story). Tell me about that decision.

NOTE: The whole of the interview will take time to evaluate the participant’s technique and visual text. In addition, questions about the narrative structure, including pacing, sequence, word and thought balance, narrative focus, etc. (which may be present to lesser or greater degree in different comics) the interviewer will also ask the student to comment upon other visual elements such as point of view, perspective, color, typography, and artistic style, and other aspects of other traditional story-building elements, e.g. plot, character, dialogue, etc. The interview will ask about the figure of speech and how it was communicated through the comic. Much of the information on the figures of speech is gathered through the interview.
We’re looking for people who like to draw

saying Norman Rockwell

“Tales happened of men and women who never thought they could be artists working 8 weeks and discovering that they’ve got a talent. They’re all the time saying, ‘I think I’m more of a draftsman than I thought I was.’”

—Phoenix, Charles, 2016, UMSL, p. 135

Two more great books that influence this work. “Action Research for Teachers” by Holly, Arhar and Kasten is a great practical guide for AR practitioners. Hatfield’s “Alternative Comics” is a great, ground-breaking theoretical book on comics. I came to both of these books only last fall, and I’m glad I did!

Gosh, that’s my picture, Freddy!

You bet, Space Mike! Our readers can get real paper copies of back-issues through Amazon!
Phoenix, Charles, 2016, UMSL, p. 136

I feel such pressure to conform.
The game’s afoot:
Findings of an action research study using comics to teach academic vocabulary

Mike Phoenix
Two more great books from Routledge that help teachers examine, evaluate, and understand their classroom practice. Gee, always a great read, provides a new way to look at teaching through the technological lens of video gaming. Rogers and Wetzel share tools of critical discourse analysis, multimodal discourse analysis and narrative analysis -- great helps for my research study!

And I owe a huge debt to this book by Marzano. His call for students to "create non-linguistic representations" of target vocabulary words helped provide the spark to get my study into my school!

**Classroom Comics Issue 4: Findings.** All comic book materials, illustrations, titles, characters, related logos, and other images used in this work remain the trademark and copyright of their respective copyright holders and are reproduced here for educational and scholarly purposes only. Except for educational purposes, none of the material in this publication may be reproduced without the written permission of Mike Phoenix and the copyright holders. © 2016 by Mike Phoenix
FINDINGS!
Good evening to our distinguished assembly of researchers, scholars and scientists, and welcome to the Hall of True Science!

As TRUE scientists we certainly appreciate the challenges and limitations confronted by our brothers and sisters in the so-called "social-sciences." A division of our organization has followed your journey with some interest and monitored your progress over the past year as you have labored to arrive at this point.

I always wondered what my dissertation defense would look like...

Not quite what I imagined, but, hey! At least they saved my gear!
In February of 2015 I started a teacher action research study in my computer literacy classroom using comics to help my 8th grade students master six, state-tested figures of speech.

I built upon a district-initiative, to teach academic vocabulary using Robert Marzano’s Six-Steps of Effective Vocabulary Instruction (2004), expanding upon Marzano’s 3rd step where “students create a non-linguistic representation of the term” (p. 93).

The pilot lasted three weeks. There were 16 participants. Grounded in a socioculture view of literacy, dual coding theory, the theory of transmediation and the so-called Frayer Model* of vocabulary instruction, my students used comics in place of — or rather, as an expansion and deepening of Marzano’s 3rd step.

The 16 students produced 50, original comics in the classroom. Taken as a composite score, participants in the pilot experienced modest post-test gains mastering the six, target words.

There were 15 participants in my second group of 8th grade computer literacy students. The three week study began on March 30, 2015. In this round I was more intentional and made it clear that each student was required to make a comic for all six of the target words. Additional “lessons learned” through the teacher action research method led me to deliver daily mini-lessons on the figures of speech and work with visual conventions of the comics medium.**

My second group of 15 student participants produced 70 original comics in the classroom. They experienced significant gains as a measure of the difference between the pre and post-test composite scores.

* see issue 2, The Lit Review, pp. 8-9.

** see issue 3, Methods, pp. 25, 28-29.
The pilot group saw a 36% gain in the composite score.

### Table A1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
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<th>Hyperbole</th>
<th>Metaphor</th>
<th>Onomatopoeia</th>
<th>Personification</th>
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**Total: 113**

### Table A2

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**Total: 153**

*Names for both pilot and second group participants are pseudonyms. Elsewhere in this issue, "Alysia" is known as "India," also a pseudonym.*
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*Group 2 saw a 104% gain!*
Impressive

Thank you, sir!

Please... "Dr. Noir..."

"Noir..." Is that French for "black?"

It's a mnemonic device.

Heh heh... Sorta' re-minds me of the private eye from Garrison Keillor's Public Radio Show... "Guy Noir..." Heh heh...

An acronym for "Nominal," "Ordinal," "Interval," and "Ratio!"

How unfortunate that your sample size was so...

Perhaps your Detective Noir could use such slender evidence to build a case?

N=16...?
N=15...?
N=31?!!!

"The game's afoot..."
...And will there be any additional comment from the gallery...

Researcher may be too close to the subject. Seems to lack objectivity!

The research design lacks control groups!

Again, the low sample size disappoints...

I see you up there, Billy Blackburn, hiding behind those ridiculous shades! “Dr. Noir?!” When you and I took statistics in undergrad school, I’m the one who came up with your mnemonic! Well, you’ve done pretty well for yourself...

...but I didn’t cut short my trip to Southern France to see you abuse my grad student like this, you big bully!

I said, “It needs more DIJON!”

Dijon.” That’s French. Don’t look so shocked! I can speak your language!

And you! Get that silly contraption off your head! You look like a lab rat!

As for your acolyte and his ‘action’ research findings...

Very well, “Harley...” You may obtain your “Dijon” in the commissary on Level 2...

We have seen his numbers!
Swoosh!

...And stay out!
I've attempted to show how classroom instruction improved through successive iterations of the "spirling" act, evaluate, reflect AR method.* I hope I've adequately addressed my secondary research question to your satisfaction, "How do I structure my classroom lessons, behavior, teacher/student activity to obtain optimal student learning using the comics resource?"

We crossed the largely uncharted "Strait of Methods" to wash-up on the "Shore of Findings..."

Having delivered the bulk of my quantitative, quasi-experimental data, I might have gone on to answer "How will the use of comics promote 8th grade students' mastery of academic language with a focus on figures of speech?" set against a continuing narrative backdrop of Dr. Noir's Hall of True Science, wherein "researchers in education split into two, almost warring camps: quantitative and qualitative" (Seidman, 2013, p. 7).

Villanous "straw-man," Dr. Noir

Imagine a scheme to monetize the education of a nation's children...

From master-servers high atop the desert citadel, homogenized curriculum content, web-based interactive lessons and standardized online, multiple choice assessments would beam to regional K-12 academies across the country -- the entire planet!

...a scheme to monetize the education of a nation's children...

Crazy idea, isn't it! Heh heh...

...but who would serve, primarily, as technicians, tending the machines and feedback loops... Until Dr. Noir's dream of total automation could be implemented...

For now, I've set aside that scenario, but it reminds me of important similarities between film and comics, both mass-media technologies born of the industrial age in the twilight of the 19th Century.

Where legions of hourly employees recruited from the ranks of idealistic, coffee shop patrons, conversant in Wi-Fi and social media would read from scripted lessons...

...they would labor day-to-day until the arrival of Noir's glorious, dystopian future, straight from a James Bond screenplay or the pages of a Doc Savage pulp fiction magazine!
Although we think of them as multimodal texts, at their ontological centers, both forms exploit the visual modality. Then how are they distinguished?

Comics operates through space...

In the sense of its unfolding through time, the cinema has more in common with radio, and the performing arts, (such as music, dance and theater), and those texts we encounter via television/video.*

In its exploitation of physical space, comics BEGINS as a member of the plastic arts.

Joe got home late and was going to watch a movie and read a comic book. He only made it to page one of the comic when he fell asleep on his sofa. When he wakes up he can pick-up where he left off.

The movie? It went on without him.

Central to any working definition of comics is recognition of the framed image.

In his analysis of alternative comics, comics theoretician Charles Hatfield discusses fundamental tensions at work in comics (Hatfield, 2005). Like juggling two apples with one hand, the comics artist, the comics reader and someone like me attempting to make sense of it all must keep two separate ideas simultaneously in play.
Here's where the work of comics theoretician, Thierry Groensteen can help make sense of it all with his overarching concept of...

**ICONIC SOLIDARITY**

"...one must realize the relational play of a plurality of interdependent images as the unique ontological foundation of comics... the central element of comics, the first criteria in the foundational order, is *iconic solidarity* (Groensteen, 1999/2007, pp. 17-18).

...and you define iconic solidarity as...?

"...interdependent images that, participating in a series, present the double characteristic of being separated--this specification dismisses unique enclosed images within a profusion of patterns or anecdotes--and which are plastically and semantically over-determined by the fact of their coexistence in praesentia" (Groensteen, 1999/2007, p. 18).

"In praesentia...?"

...dans le moment-present.

---

**IMAGES, FRAMES AND PANELS**

"...in a large measure, it is the frame that makes the panel" (Groensteen 1999/2007, p. 27).

To account for comics and the way comics embody iconic solidarity both conceptually and in practice, Groensteen establishes his spatiotopical system. He observes that without any reference to what may or may not be inside a comics panel, it will exhibit 3 parameters: Form, Area and Site.

You'll begin to see other ways comics and cinema part company!

The aspect ratio of the cinematic image remains constant. Not so with any particular panel on the comics page.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) were keenly aware of the meaning-making affordance of site as a consequence of long-established western convention, both in the single image and magazine layout.*

---

*after Kress and van Leeuwen, Fig. 6.15: The dimensions of visual space.
Following Groensteen, it will be useful to first understand something more of the total system of which the hypothetical panel is a part.

“Although often separated by thin blank spaces, panels can be considered as interdependent fragments of a global form, something that is made all the more clear and consistent when the exterior edges of the panels are traditionally aligned” (Groensteen, 1999/2007, p. 30).

Groensteen (1999/2007) names the sum of the panels in a given page the “hyperframe” (p. 30).

The sum of all the pages in a given work, whether one to 100 pages -- or more -- is the comics’ “multiframe,” (Groensteen, 1999/2007, p. 22). The more than 170 comics created by my two student groups were each, single-page comics. In this instance then, the hyperframe and multiframe described the same space.

The first, mass-produced comics began as a single tier of contiguous panels, in French, the “bande dessinee” (drawn strips) (Groensteen, 1999/2007, p. 20). The comic strips first appeared in the pages of American newspapers in the late 1890’s.

Later, newspaper comic strip artists, the hugely successful mass-media entertainment celebrities of their day, would exploit entire tabloid pages of the color Sunday supplements. Notable examples include Herriman’s Krazy Kat, McVay’s Little Nemo, and Foster’s Prince Valiant.
The original newspaper comic strips were produced serially, short, 3 and 4-panel, stand-alone gag strips, or brief installments of ongoing adventures. The most popular strips were reprinted in various hard-cover and paper-backed books. In May of 1934 some of these strips were reprinted and appeared in the world's first comic book distributed to news stands, Famous Funnies #1.*

Throughout the 1940's and 50's comic books would routinely present two and three separate stories in every issue. By the 1960's, during the industry's Silver Age, "book-length" stories of 18 to 22 pages became increasingly common, a practice instituted by a small, rebranded comic book company named Marvel.

By the mid-1960's, Marvel was routinely producing full-length stories that often continued, serially, from month to month. Multi-issue stories often took two, three or more issues to resolve, with new sub-plots rising up through the narrative, providing starting points for new rounds of continuing storylines.

Today, and still, chiefly for economic reasons, long-form comics continue to be produced serially* (Hatfield, 2005). Far fewer are conceived, created, and published initially, as single, stand-alone works.

* indeed, for economic reasons, this work, too, was produced serially.
We may see something of comics’ historic production, its presentation in a situated, physical artifact. Short form or long, the multiframe is designed for its material presentation on the physical page of a newspaper tabloid sheet, a comic magazine, album or book, or (as we shall see in a later issue of this series) a smart electronic screen.

Comics must occupy particular regions of space. The agent of that occupation is the comics panel, delineated by its frame, designed and LAYED OUT, along with its contiguous panels, constrained only by the limits (and affordances) of the hyperframe’s physical manifestation, “the page.”

Another key contribution from the premiere French comics theoretician, Groensteen, involves his notion of comics’ archology, the articulation of the panels. Groensteen observes two types. The first and most readily apparent form he names “restricted archology,” a common configuration of contiguous panels, exhibiting a clear narrative or temporal relationship,(Groensteen, 1999/2007, p. 22).

The second type, general archology, is established over distance. It is similar in effect to the leit-motif in music and alpha-text literature. Recurrent visual codes, patterns and design elements that weave their way over the course of the multiframe, is a term (tressage) that translators have named “braiding” (Groensteen, 1999/2007, p. 22).

Groensteen’s notion of restricted archology was anticipated by Scott McCloud, who, in 1993, introduced the world to the notion of “closure” a term from gestalt psychology appropriated by McCloud and which he developed in his theoretical treatise on comics. He describes how the mind of the reader, navigating one of six possible transitions, fills-in the gaps between one comics panel and the next, creating in the imagination, a continuous sequence.

Groensteen reached a similar conclusion in his discussion of his six functions of the panel frame. He concluded that the (1) function of closure and the (2) separative function, are nearly synonymous. His approach differs from McCloud’s and is more complex. He suggests that the comic artist has in mind a narrative and that the frame encloses key moments for presentation. This operation is analogous to the tourist who returns from vacation with hundreds of photos of the experience, but who selects from among the mass of images, only those sufficient to “tell the story.”

In describing the separative function, Groensteen states that "...one could not connect the visual utterances if they were not distinct," but concludes after a lengthy discussion that his separative function and the function of closure "are, in truth, nothing but the same function, successively envisaged as it exerts itself on the interior space of the frame and toward the exterior field" (Groensteen, 1999/2007, p. 44).

The effect of this dual function of enclosing an image and pushing it toward the exterior, our conventional understanding of McCloud's sense of closure, was apparent in an early activity I assigned to my second group of student participants on April 1, 2015. Keep in mind, that beyond the Gallery Walk and a pretest on comics, the students returned work reproduced below without any previous conversation, activity or instruction from me involving comics.

Comics:

Comics is a visual sign system that uses images to communicate information, tell stories, influence people.

Comics uses a sequence or series of images to communicate.

The images are almost always contained in a PANEL, defined by outline or frame, and set off from other panels by a gap, space or GUTTER.

Use these three panels as a sequence to show a sun rise.

Raquel's Comic -- April 1, 2015

This and the typed text above was the total extent of the prompt.

It elicited these visual texts!

Here's S2's comic, AKA Raquel.
Here are comics from W2, AKA Serenity and Q2, AKA Derrick. Check out their quantitative data on page 9. Derrick posted gains between the pre and post. Serenity started with 12 points on the pre and ended with 12 points on the post. Does one imagine Serenity learned nothing about figures of speech over the course of our 3-week study? What about Penny in the pilot study who scored perfect 10’s on both the pre and post tests?

Groensteen enumerated another 4 essential functions of the comics panel.

Getta' look at their comics... And it will help to develop a few more tools for looking. It was Angela Yannicopoulou (2004) who demonstrated that pre-schoolers apprehended characters' emotions through expressive typography alone.

Similarly, prior to instruction, my students displayed a grasp of out-of-school technoliteracies, through their ability to harness a fundamental affordance of comics and generate original narrative sequences.

*see issue #2: The Lit Review, p. 30
"In reproducing the form of the support, the image cooperates with it rather than denying or confronting it" (Groensteen, 1999/2007, p. 46).

"...more easily than a circle, a diamond, a star, a triangle, or a trapezoid, the rectangle (or its regular stand-in, the square) is able to be placed in a sequence, arranged in strips" (p. 47).

Imagine the image that inhabits the panel frame; it is always at least partly determined by the panel's formal structure. Its visual effect, at least a portion of its "meaning," will likewise be influenced by the constraints and affordances of its structuring frame.

Groensteen notes that with symmetrical shapes we easily grasp the geometric center, an area that often becomes a focal point of composition, but also and, again, as a mirror of the rectilinear page, the square (or nearly square) panel offers an equitable distribution of those mirror-images around the central axis.

Yep, the good ol' square -- privileged throughout Western civilization as the mental (and physical) canvas for presentation of the visual image. Despite its appearance in crystalline structures of the natural world, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue that the "...squares and rectangles are the shapes of the mechanical, technological order of the world of human construction. They dominate the shape of our cities, our buildings, our roads. They dominate the shape of many of the objects we use in daily life, including our pictures..." (p. 54).

"...rectangular shapes can be stacked, aligned with each other in geometrical patterns: they form the modules with which we construct our world..." (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 54).

So, when building a multiframe, the square is your "go-to" panel!

It's always a cause for celebration when you can get two experts to agree!
Before we get to your rhythmic function of the panel, I was going to ask about those odd-shaped panels. You'd see them in some of the mainstream superhero comics, those drawn by the "hot" young artists of the late 1960's, trend-setters like Adams and Steranko?

"Cartoonists know this well: every recourse to a form other than the quadrilateral, if it is allowed to shape, by its exceptional character, each elected panel, presents a serious inconvenience in obliging the neighboring panels to be contorted in order to make space for the intrusion" (Groensteen, 1999/2007, p. 47).

I can certainly see how these odd shaped panels can upset the visual rhythm of the unbroken rows and ranks of standard square panels. A good time to look at Groensteen's rhythmic function!

Panel frames perform a rhythmic function. Tier upon tier of panel frames of identical shape and size establish a repetitive visual pattern. The reader/viewer may forget she is traversing the gaps and gutters between panels. This visual rhythm may be intentionally disrupted, by the intrusion of a panel of a different shape or size. With subsequent panel frames, a new rhythm may be established.

Conversely, a large panel can slow the visual pacing. Although always subject to the panel content and the influence of adjoining panels, large panels and panels elongated along the horizontal base may slow down pacing, the reading rate, and the illusion of time produced through the reader's experience of an atemporal artifact.

It is a common practice for comic artists to speed-up the passage of time by establishing a pattern of many small, panels.
Next up on Groensteen’s list of panel functions is the expressive. Size and shape are part of this expressive function, but, in addition, line weight, color and ornamentation are other characteristics potentially freighted with visual meaning.

Recall my visit from Sylvia Pantaleo in the loading bay at the Hall of Teacher PD, in issue #2. She viewed her students’ original paneling through Halliday’s (1978) conceptual lens of the three metafunctions of language.

Those panels way back on pages 33 and 34 of Issue #2: The Lit Review, sure seem like a long “time” ago. Heh heh.

In line with your thinking, Pantaleo describes how the ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions may be coded in the panel frame.

Thanks, Mike. Additionally, “...the frame of the comics panel can connote or index the image it encloses” (Groensteen, 1999/2007, p. 49).

“As for the readerly function, it goes beyond the semiotic function inherent in framing because, since the panel contributes to a sequential discourse, its frame calls for not only contemplation but also reading” (Groensteen, 1999/2007, p. 56).

Here’s an example of Myca’s (a pseudonym) comic from Figure 1* of my study of fourth grade students’ use of paneling. The affordances of paneling which were the focus of my analysis included: “border colors, border styles, intensity, shapes and sizes, and sequencing” (Pantaleo, 2013b, p. 157).

“...when he meets a frame, the reader is taken to presuppose that, within the perimeter that has been drawn, there is a content to be deciphered. The frame is always an invitation to stop and scrutinize” Groensteen, 1999/2007, p. 54).

In my explication of Groensteen’s 6 functions of the panel, you may have noted my continual reference to “the other” panels necessary to promote closure, to separate (from something else), to build a structure, establish rhythm, to call for a reading... These panels hang-together through Groensteen’s iconic solidarity across the spatio-topia of the multiframe.
With a general view of the comics landscape and the function of the panel, it will help to revisit some other contemporary comics theoreticians who have thought deeply on the subject: How do comics work?

Barbara Postema (2013) has written about comics in terms of their fragmentation. A panel image seldom presents everything about its subject; the artist is selective. Cartooning presents fragments. At the same time, what is presented is that much more important.

Similarly, a comics story is presented through a series of narrative fragments. Postema (2013) argues that through McCloud’s mechanism of closure, the comics reader/viewer stitches together those disconnected pieces into a narrative whole.

Charles Hatfield has viewed comics as a set of four tensions “between codes of signification: between the single image and the image-in-series; between narrative sequence and page surface; and, more broadly, between reading-as-experience and the text as material object” (Hatfield, 2005, p. 46).

The visual metaphor of the juggling act is mirrored in both the artist’s and reader/viewer’s confrontation with the several often competing or contradictory “readings” afforded by comics.
In Hatfield's view, the first and most fundamental tension is between "Code vs. Code (word vs. image)" (Hatfield, 2005, p. 36). In common parlance, comics are made up of words and pictures. Although there are exceptions,* virtually all comics contain visual (pictures) and alpha text. In this sense, comics are multimodal.

McCloud (1993) argued that "pictures are received information" and "writing is perceived information" (p. 49). Furthermore, he maintained that words and pictures are simply visual codes on opposite ends of his hypothetical "picture plane," moving from concrete photo-realism and "reality" to the abstract, alpha text of written words and "language" (McCloud, 1993, p. 51).

Since 1993, writers from Hatfield (2005) to Postema (2013) have criticised McCloud's analysis (while still holding McCloud and his pioneering masterpiece, Understanding Comics, in high regard). The word "CAT" is not simply a "more abstract" version of the pictorial representation of the cat we observe in the natural world. Hatfield and Postema argue that verbal text is of an altogether DIFFERENT order than the visual. Although we see printed letters, written language, as McCloud wrongly supposes, is not a "more abstracted" form of the visual. Letters represent the visual code for verbal sounds that by convention have come to stand for the feline animal we observe in "reality."

Hatfield concludes, "Though the image is, as W.J.T. Mitchell says, 'the sign that pretends not to be a sign,' (Iconology 43), it remains a sign nonetheless, 'as bound up with habit and convention as any text' (64). Pictures are not simply received: they must be decoded" (Hatfield, 2005, p. 37).

Hatfield (2005), dismisses McCloud's distinction between passively received pictures and actively perceived words "...as Perry Nodelman points out with regard to picture books. All visual images, even the most apparently representational ones, require a knowledge of learned competencies and cultural assumptions before they can be rightly understood" (17) (p. 37).

While they may not inhabit the poles of a McCloudian Picture Plane, in comics "word and image approach each other: words can be visually inflected, reading as pictures, while pictures can become as abstract and symbolic as words. In brief, the written text can function like images, and images like written text*" (Hatfield, 2005, p. 16).
"...responding to comics often depends on recognizing word and image as two 'different' types of sign, whose implications can be played against each other -- to gloss, to illustrate, to contradict or complicate or ironize the other" (Hatfield, 2005, p. 37).

That's very interesting, Charles, but I didn't see a lot of that on display in my student work. I think some of my students just more or less turned in the minimum requirement: to provide a definition and an example in comics format.

Pretty low bar you set for them.

Not so low... I mean, it was a big step for several of my students to even attempt drawing. Going into the pilot study, possible student reluctance to draw was a real concern of mine.

Maybe I'm making this more complicated than it need be.

Comics are complicated. It's a hybrid of two, extremely complex sign systems!

I want my readers to come away from this issue with as much understanding of comics as I've gained, yet a lot of this theory goes beyond what my students needed to create their comics. It goes beyond what I needed when I drew comics in the '60s and '70s. It may go beyond what my readers need to understand my students' work!

None of my students' comics were long-form. They drew single-page comics. One wouldn't observe the significance of the final, lower right-hand panel in page turns. One would miss the power of the two-page spread. It's unlikely one would observe Groensteen's general arthology, (braiding) across a single comics page.

How so?

True enough! But it's also true that you've barely scratched the surface of current comics theory.

Well...

If there isn't anything else, I have a plane to catch back to the West Coast.

Before you leave...

How about a couple more "tensions?"
Simple enough... Of course it helps if you understand the comic artist's sense of the word, "breakdown."

Breakdowns are the rough drawings the artist makes when she's figuring out a story.

Yes!

Sort of like film-makers who story-board a sequence of camera shots with a series of drawings.

Good analogy!

“The reverse process, that of reading through such images and inferring connections between them, has been dubbed... ‘closure’ by McCloud, in keeping with the reader-response emphasis of his Understanding Comics” (Hatfield, 2005, p. 41).

Oh, we’re familiar with McCloud!

“In fact, ‘breakdown’ and ‘closure’ are complementary terms, both describing the relationship between sequence and series...” (Hatfield, 2005, p. 41).

Great, Charles! It reminds me of Louise Rosenblatt’s (1978) transactional theory of reading. Wow!

Sure, Mike! “...the reader’s role is crucial, and requires invocation of learned competencies: the relationships between pictures are a matter of convention, not inherent connectedness” (Hatfield, 2005, p. 41).

So... Um... Is that enough?

Well, I was thinking of just one more -- to bring your own thinking full-circle back to Groensteen’s concept of iconic solidarity and his ideas of the spatiotopia and the multiframe...?

Oh, my third tension -- "sequence vs. surface?"

That’s the one!
This was a tension I could see at play in a number of comics created by my students.

It’s a tension that is fundamental to comics. "In most cases, the successive images in a comic are laid out contiguously on a larger surface or surfaces (that is, a page or pages). Each surface organizes the images into a constellation of discrete units or ‘panels.’ A single image within such a cluster typically functions in two ways at once: as a ‘moment’ in an imagined sequence of events, and as a graphic element in an atemporal design" (Hatfield, 2005, p. 48).

"Most long-form comics maintain a tug-of-war between these different functions, encouraging a near-simultaneous apprehension of the single image as both moment-in-sequence and design element" (Hatfield, 2005, p. 48).

"In other words, there is a tension between the concept of ‘breaking-down’ a story into constituent images and the concept of laying out those images together on an unbroken surface. This tension lies at the heart of comics design -- and poses yet another challenge to the reader" (Hatfield, 2005, p. 48).

You say that very well. I really appreciate how your analysis echoes the work of McCloud and Groensteen.

Thanks, Mike, and if you quote another line from my book, Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature, you’ll have to send me a royalty check!!!

Yeah, right. Heh heh...

So, is there anything else I can do to help before I head to the airport?

Well... There was one thing...
We talked about comics, but the preceding 3-page conversation is based on his words on comics theory from his book (2005). I first read his book in the fall of 2015.

The dialogic nature of consciousness rewrites the past. Since producing Issue 1 of this dissertation in June and July of 2015, my understanding of such terms as “series” and “sequence” has changed in light of new reading and sustained, critical reflection. Notice the new book on the shelf in a panel that first appeared on page 2 of Issue 1. (While revisiting that panel, below, I corrected spelling on the name of one of my influential professors, too!)

At what point is “truth” fixed in final form? The serial nature of this “graphic novel” begs the question!

Wish I had space to cover the nature of these panel “inserts/insets” (Postema, 2013, p. 42).

*compare with original panel appearing in Issue 1: The Intro, p. 2.*
It’s time to look at my students’ production of their original comics. Toward that end, I’ll turn, naturally, to my memory of those exciting days and to the entries in my teacher’s journal.

Here are the first two entries. I pasted them into a black spiral notebook. The remaining 50 pages were hand-written.

For the near balance of this issue, I’ll use comics to recreate the realities of my classroom study...

Between my extensive journal notes and the student exit interviews, not to mention my students’ comics, the rest of this issue pretty much writes itself! Heh heh...
“Comics Studies Teacher’s Journal

Monday, February 2, 2015

(This entry is being written in hindsight, on Tuesday February 3, 2015.) The kick-off to the first day was generally good. The goal was to have the participants complete the battery of pretests and surveys. I had been very concerned that off-task behavior, talking and other distractions might have compromised the integrity of the student’s individual responses. I was greatly pleased that I saw a very high level of cooperation and the students spent over half an hour in sustained, concentrated, work. I had given explicit instruction for each of the instruments and only one of the students misunderstood the survey instrument. Most of the students completed the majority of items. A cursory examination of the responses showed that students had attempted to answer the items. Another positive note, at the start of session [sic] is that a new student had finally brought in her permission form signed by her parent. The only downside of the day was that three of the participants were absent that day.”

On Tuesday, February 3, 2015, I brought in 13 artifacts for the Gallery Walk of Comics (See Issue 3, pp. 22-24). The next day, 2-4-15, I introduced students to web resources on my teacher web-site, including Scott McCloud’s Chapter 3 on closure.

There was homework associated with this. I got the feeling that only a few students truly engaged the reading. (This was confirmed the next day when only 3 students turned in their answers.) That hunch, led me to a decision on Wednesday night, reflected in the following journal entry.

Thursday, 2-5-15 11:04 PM

After the blow-out of Wednesday

I took Mr. Alonso’s suggestion and decided to get forward and ask the students to “grade comics” based on their understanding of the figure of speech.

When students enter at 10:10

I said you can get on your computer and make a comic space to show a figure of speech.

You can get on your computer and make a comic to show a figure of speech.

Draw your own panels or use these templates!
Eight of the 31 eighth graders who participated in the studies.  Clockwise to the left are India, Cecelia, Tyrone, Nate (Derrick & Serenity -- two members of the 2nd Group) and Daria & Penny.  All names are psuedonyms.
"...When students entered at 10:10 I said..."

"You can get on your computers and make a comic to show a figure of speech."

"A student ought to be able to read a comic and be able to diagram a speech figure, an example of it."

"Tyrone" immediately set about drawing. I was encouraged.*

"As five other students took up the challenge, Tyrone was finishing up his comic and wanted to read it to the others."

"I said..."

"Hey, Tyrone, there were some underground comics printed back in the 60’s with all kinds of swear words and very adult things going on, but they are not appropriate here."

"I heard the word [@#$%] and realized Tyrone had used the assignment as a pretext for writing inappropriate words.**

"A tough, ironic call, but one I had to make. Tyrone was the first comic of the study, yet my move to effectively censor him is emblematic of my issue #1 epigram: 'Between the idea and the reality... Summoning Tyrone’s ‘out of school technoliteracies,’ as both a ‘change agent’ AND an agent of ‘school standards of acceptable literate practice,’ I silenced the first evidence of the voice I sought to promote."

"I made a general announcement."

"I asked Tyrone to erase his [offensive] dialogue and come up with other language."

"This may have been only part of his motivation."

A tough, ironic call, but one I had to make. Tyrone’s was the first comic of the study, yet my move to effectively censor him is emblematic of my issue #1 epigram: 'Between the idea and the reality... Summoning Tyrone’s ‘out of school technoliteracies,’ as both a ‘change agent’ AND an agent of ‘school standards of acceptable literate practice,’ I silenced the first evidence of the voice I sought to promote.

*a pseudonym

**this may have been only part of his motivation
Two chairs stuck on an island

Personification

The End
The punchline of “Two Chairs Stuck on an Island,” occurs in the 7th panel: “Not how I remember it.” In panels 5–7 the chairs recall being “sat on” by two different human females and their ensuing disagreement, with expletives, over their perceptions of the experience.

My graduate course in Social Justice (Fall 2014) still fresh in my mind. I found occasion to mention the negative, sexist objectification of women promoted in the comic. Tyrone clearly understood my point-of-view, removed the dialogue, and I thanked him.

I spoke with him about the nature of “personification.” Tyrone understood the short-form definition, “Giving human qualities to non-living objects.” I put the comic and the incident behind me, convinced Tyrone held a simplistic view of the term. It is only today, a year later, reviewing the comic that I appreciate Tyrone’s message. “If chairs could only talk…” In language common to network TV and PG-13 movies, he had hit upon a provocative subject, one I had shut-down, fearing for my position as a middle school teacher.

Meanwhile...

“Cecelia” was busy drawing exquisite designs on her computer. I showed her a number of ways she could create bitmap images and import them into desktop publishing [MS Publisher software] where she could resize, frame and add speech balloons.

“I went over to Lila and Nila* who had been joined by Tayla.” They were off-task on the Internet and I encouraged them to pick-up a paper template or begin work on the assignment using the computer.

“They seemed interested that they could copy and paste photographs and add speech balloons.”

“I showed Tayla how she could repeat the image, using copy and paste and add word balloons filled with white ink to add text.”

“Ultimately, only Tayla created a comic (that day). I showed her how she could paste her image of some singing star she had copied onto a desktop publishing document.”

“Tayla supplied the text. Lila seemed intrigued when she saw Tayla working. I asked Nila to start working, but she said it was boring.”

*Tayla’s real name was typed here.
“I went over to Cecelia,” who was busy drawing complex images in Paint [MS Paint, a simple graphics program standard with MS operating systems]. The student beside her, [DeDe*], seemed intent on the Internet. I encouraged her to begin the task.”

“Meanwhile, [Nate*] had completed his comic.”

“[Camella*] was working on a comic investigating simile.”

“[India*] was working on a comic investigating onomatopoeia.”

Hey! You might consider onomatopoeia! It’s where you write words that stand-in for sounds.

“I easily understood what her visuals represented. Text and visual worked well together to express meaning.”

“I can’t draw a train.”

“I grabbed a piece of paper.”

“Here...”
India followed the steps, used the schema to draw her own train engine.

The train goes CHOO CHOO!

India completed her first comic.

Neil Cohn (2013) argues that comic artists (and visual/graphic artists, generally) develop a repertoire of "schema -- a cognitively stored pattern" which they apply in given contexts, building figures and representations based on learned rules of perspective and proportion. (p. 10.)

"Schematic representations are particularly apparent in drawings by authors of comics. These patterns combine to make larger novel forms, thus masking their systematic nature" (Cohn, 2013, p. 26).
“Even people who do not consider themselves proficient at drawing likely use the same visual vocabulary of simple graphic schemas for houses, airplanes, people, mountains, the sun, flowers and many other objects” (Cohn, 2013, p. 26).

“While these figures are iconic images of houses, airplanes, and people, they reflect conventionalized schemas of drawing (do you know anyone whose house actually looks like that?)” (Cohn, 2013, p. 25).

“The ‘stick figure’ is also a conventionalized representation of a person. Not all cultures use the stick figure, but they do have diverse yet systematic ways of drawing people…” (Cohn, 2013, p. 25).

Early in my second study, I had a conversation with one of my student participants (an exceptionally bright and motivated 14 year old who went on to win a substantial scholarship to a local university) reluctant to begin her comics, claiming she was unable to draw. She had drawn a stick figure.*

I came alongside her with a scrap of paper.

Can you read this?

Sure...

...person...

And I can read your picture. It’s a person. Right?

When you look at it that way...

“Person...”

And what’s this? What did you draw...?

...A person...

She smiled and went on to complete five comics displaying iconic imagery, drawn by hand on the computer.

Despite some success with reluctant visual artists, I realized that some students would not overcome their aversion to drawing during the 3-week window of the pilot study. I permitted students in both the pilot and the 2nd Group to appropriate images (see Taylor’s comic on page 35).

According to Groensteen...

“...the spatio-topical code, which organizes the co-presence of panels within space... equally governs the framing relations of photo-novels. Further, this related medium has also adopted the speech balloon as a method of inserting writing into the heart of the image” (Groensteen, 1999/2007, p. 6).

“At the end of the day, what makes comics a language that cannot be confused with any other is, on the one hand, the simultaneous mobilization of the entirety of codes (visual and discursive) that constitute it, and, at the same time, the fact that none of these codes probably belongs purely to it...” (Groensteen, 1999/2007, p. 6).
Feb 9 2014 [sic]*

I learned that a teacher was out and I would be joined by another class—unfortunately this was the very same class that would be taking part in my study next quarter. Things worked out in a fairly positive way. I had loaded assignments on line and had intended to spend the day bowing my study participants look over the alphabetical test of the figures definitions and examples from what I would expect in the first stage of the traditional Marzano approach.

*The entry in my teacher journal reads “Feb 9 2014” which is inaccurate (the date was 2-9-15) an error common among writers in a new year. In production, I considered deleting “2014” from the scanned image above to help preserve an illusion, the enhanced truth claims of photographic documentation.
The assignment was essentially a mirror of the pre-test, only in this instance they had online resources to explore the target words which the majority of students quickly pursued.

Only five students in the class failed to tackle the class assignment.

Again on a positive side—the student was able to "take care" of this without much interaction with the "visibly" 8th grade class. Indeed most of my participants were at work at their individual stations on the assignment before the other class began digging in...
One more fortunate benefit of this strange day.
A student who had been absent since the past five days (the entire duration of the study) showed up today. It was a student.

It was Allison (a pseudonym, AKA DJ) a “talented, motivated and cooperative student” whom I’d taught since she was in 5th grade. Her family was going through a rough time.

Feb 9, 2015
Journal Entry cont.
“I saw her as she walked through the doors, handed her the protests and the comics surveys and was able to get her to complete the instruments…”

“Having not talked about comics or figures of speech, I felt that her responses would accurately reflect the mind-set of the other students who had completed the instruments the previous week.”

People come and go all the time in my urban district: teachers, students, administrators and staff.

One of my collaborators, Ms. Alsace, to whom I owed so much for her ideas shaping the pilot, left the building at Spring Break before the start of the 2nd group. She never returned.

I’m not complaining. It’s a simple reality of urban education -- at least in my limited experience...

Absenteeism. Transience. “High Mobility,” I’ve heard it called.

One of the challenges of teacher action research and a dissertation of practice.

You learn to make the best of the time you have!

That’s one of the great things about the data, the artifacts, transcripts and journal observations. Even though they present only disjointed “snapshots,” disconnected fragments – they do provide a way back, an opportunity to reflect, to ponder, to analyze.

I’ll examine several comics in detail, selected from 120+ created, representing a high-degree of student engagement in the production of these novel texts.

Like Allison, Penny was another student with attendance issues. Of the 15 days of the pilot study, Penny was present for 6. Her comics are telling.
Hyperbole is an exaggerated statements or claims not to be taken literally.
Panel #1. As Albert points out, after Kress and van Leeuwen, the left-hand portion of the image in Western societies is reserved for that which is established (Albert, 2009; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In Western comics, we read left to right and top to bottom in the so-called “Z-path” (Cohn, 2013, 91).

Penny had a near-perfect score on the Z-Path portion of the comics conventions pre-test she took on 2-2-15.

The school is massive, central and dominates the panel. It is clearly labeled with alpha text and an indexical arrow (Cohn, 2013, p. 19).

Comics narrative sequences, in a convention common to cinematic film commonly begin with an establishing shot, and this is the case with the first panel of Penny’s eight-panel comic.

The edifice of the school is central to the story, as it may be in the life of Penny and the faceless children who are drawn or tethered (chained?) to the building through an indexical “path line” (Cohn, 2013, p. 38).

Attendance at school had been a major issue for Penny and her family; the faceless children “walking to school” is the narrative focus of our orientation in the panel.

I interviewed Penny on 2-27-15 about her comics generally. She was very clear in her replies:

“…I didn’t feel like drawing -- faces.”

“What was your choice about not having faces on them?”

“What would you -- if you’d had more time -- what do you think you might have done differently about it -- if anything?”

“This would have been my rough draft and I would have redrew it... Over...”

“Now, I see that you, uh, kind of tell a story here... Some people just have images that aren’t really related -- except that they’re related by “it’s a figure of speech,” but you have these different characters that appear in different panels, across...”

“Mm hmm...”
"Why did you decide to do it that way?"

"Because -- just when I think of a comic, I think of two people talking, or a group of people talking."

Panel #1 and panel #2 orient the reader to the setting and the scene, in a classroom with a teacher. Again, alpha text and an ideficalarrow is used to buttress the iconic imagery.

There are additional visual design elements at play.

In their discussion of fundamental geometric shapes Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) suggest that triangles, "especially when tilted... can convey directionality, point at things..." (p. 55).

"Triangles are 'symbols of generative power' (Thompson and Davenport, 1982: 110), and represent 'action, conflict, tension' (Dondis, 1973: 44)" (pp. 55-56).

Compare with the discussion of circles and curved shapes in Issue #1, p. 14 and squares and rectangles in this issue, p. 21.

The positioning of the figures, codes the common notion of superior rank, the power-relations of the single teacher-leader above the many. Kress and Leeuwen (2006) note in their layout analysis (see page 15 of this issue) that the "real" inhabits the lower portion of the page/panel, while its upper reaches are reserved for "the ideal."

The figures stand at the vertices of a triangle. From the horizontal base, the viewer's eye is drawn by the vector formed by the left and right hand legs to the apex, the dominant space in Penny's design, held by the teacher.

It is presumably the teacher who asks/demands in panel #3 "Do anyone know about figure language?" Note that in panels 2 through 4 the superior figure is always drawn with an open mouth.

A character replies, with a smile, "I do!" The character feels empowered, with the agency to answer the demand, which is repeated in panel #4. "What you know?" The student character presents an answer and Penny draws the character not in the "demand" orientation, but in terms of an "offer," and the vector of the agent's gaze directs the reader to the academic definition of Hyperbole (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p.118-119).
The definition is nearly central in the composition of the page.

Hyperbole: is an exaggerated statement or claim not to be taken literally.

It is written out in its own panel, #5, and clearly represents the type of social language that Penny recognizes as the valued currency of the school. In a sense, this is the evaluative act of the narrative (Rogers & Wetzel, 2014). The character has met the challenge and “passed the test.”

Penny has left one last part of the assignment for the end. The last three panels function as “resolution” and “coda” (Rogers & Wetzel, 2014, p. 110) in a sequence reminiscent of the classic newspaper gag strips.

The comics main character (identified by the horizontal mouth) is able to apply the target figure of speech in a social context, and her reference to “3 pages” (of homework) returns the reader to the students’ reality of the present moment.

Was it schooling, exposure to film, television, storybooks, comics or, as Penny herself said, “two people talking, or a group of people talking” that developed in her the keen sense of narrative that she was able to successfully exploit in her comics?

Again, in panel #6, the agent replies with the clever punch line, “Because we only have like three pages.” Evidently, this amount -- 3 pages -- did not seem like a lot of homework to Penny.

Although executed in comics, Penny’s work exhibits the type of “well-developed narrative” identified by Abbott and McCartney (2001) in their longitudinal study of reading instruction (p. 389).

Like Penny, Cecelia (a pseudonym) had a perfect score on her post-test knowledge of the tested figures of speech. (Penny scored 18 on the pre and post tests. Cecelia had a 3-point gain). Although I have spent some time in the presentation, analysis, and discussion of the testing results, I believe the comics themselves demonstrate a level of mastery of the target vocabulary words. While Penny’s five comics are representative of the 26 student comics that demonstrated a high level of narrative “storytelling.” Cecelia’s comics represent the 25 comics whose constituent panels were of a “series” nature, whose panel transitions were of the aspect-to-aspect and subject-to-subject variety described by McCloud (1993).

Hang on to your hats, folks. Page turns are always a powerful moment in the traditional comics reading experience.* Well, when you flip to landscape orientation (a mode increasingly common in the new screen-world of the 21st Century) you may be in for an additional shock. With that said, for those reading the old-fashioned comic book version of this issue, prepare to spin the wheel 90 degrees to the right, as we take a look at Cecelia’s computer-generated comic.

*For “page turns” see Sipe and Brighton (2009) and Issue 3, p. 33.
Cecelia’s comic (reproduced left), is comprised of four panels organized in four quadrants of a landscape-oriented page. The central focus of the page is a horizontal banner/panel with the comic title, “SIMILE” in black capital letters against a beige background. The comic’s title dominates the page, first in the conventional reading path (site), occupying nearly a third of the page (size), and reinforcing its dominance by mirroring the page surface with its rectilinear frame (form).

To the banner’s right in a smaller, nearly square panel in the upper right hand quadrant of the page, two bird-like figures sit on a wire (?) against a blue background, a white disk in the space above them. Alphabetic text is enclosed in two word balloons attributed to the first and second figure.

The positioning of the speech text defies convention in that the first word balloon, attributed to the first character is clearly a response to the utterance of the second character. The second character’s speech balloon contains the text, “The moon is like a white disk in the sky.” This utterance helps further define the object in the “sky” between, slightly above, and now, we understand, much further behind the two figures.

Cecelia uses iconic representation and the type of conventional schema discussed on page 38 to render two birds sitting beneath the moon. “Birdness” relies primarily upon the triangular “beaks.”

The first text balloon on the panel and attributed to the first character we encounter reading left to right, contains the utterance, “YEAH IT DOES.”

The dialogue is difficult to navigate, in that the response appears before the inciting statement. Moreover, the grammatical structure is asymmetrical. The reader may be forced to mentally restate the second bird’s statement: “The moon LOOKS like a white disk in the sky,” or recast the predicate in the first utterance: “Yeah, it IS!”

The lower, left hand quadrant of the page contains a large black panel displaying a field of yellow, five-pointed stars. One star is more elaborately rendered. It alone has a simple, smiling face, and exhibits a banner-like penumbra in place of the traditionally rendered five-points of the other, faceless stars. A word balloon, attributed to an expressionless five-pointed star on the left, contains the text, “THE SUN IS LIKE A BLAZING BALL OF LIGHT.”

The reader now understands that the large smiling star is the sun. A second, faceless star on the far right echoes the remark of the first star. Its utterance is tied to a second speech bubble with the text, “A BLAZING BALL.”
Phoenix, Charles, 2016, UMSL, p. 186

A small rectangle in the page's fourth quadrant contains a tiny character with a smiling face. The character is looking in the direction of an enormous flower. The character's text bubble reads, "THE FLOWER LOOK LIKE A BLOSSOM OF HOPE."

Cecelia concludes her argument with a third example of the target vocabulary word. Some readers may have difficulty navigating the error in subject/verb agreement in the English alpha text, but the panel's essential meaning is reinforced by the visual: the speaking character looks/is looking/eyes are pointed in the direction of the blue-petaled flower.

The gutters between the title banner, the bird panel, the star panel and the flower panel are significant. The smaller size of the panels on the right hand side of the page leaves a great deal of empty white space. Cecelia has "handwritten," in electronic manuscript the two separate words, "like" and "as," in elegant cursive script, to punctuate the two words of alphabetic text so commonly associated with the textbook definition of "simile."

Groensteen (1999/2007) notes in reference to the affordance of margins and the traditionally void intericonic space of the gutters:

"It must also be noted that the margin is not necessarily virginal. It frequently welcomes a title, a signature, a page number, inscriptions in which the structuring effect is not negligible" (p. 32).

And on page 32 of your book you cite the work of European comic artists with whom we are unfamiliar, but also Sergio Aragonés, whose humorous gags, bearing no relation to the surrounding text, often populated the white margins of Mad Magazine.

In Cecelia’s case, she has used the electronic manuscript both as visual design element and as alphabetic text that meaningfully contributes to interrogation of the target vocabulary word, "simile."

Apart from some confusion for the reader in negotiating the reading path in the panel containing the two birds, or traditional grammatical errors in alphabetic text, the eye moves effortlessly across the comic. For any reader familiar with the parameters of the student assignment, the over-arching meaning of the comic speaks through the fusion of alphabetic text and iconic imagery.
At least part of the story of student mastery of academic language (mastery of any language or skill, for that matter) becomes a question of sustained engagement. The production of any text, the act of designing, both in its mental and physical manifestations, of acquiring and marshalling available designs and realizing a transformative redesign, at some level becomes a matter of physical technique. (New London Group, 1996).

In the old “language arts” this may be a production of verbal sounds, handwritten manuscript, keyboarded text, or, as in the case of comics production, an assemblage of visual signs (iconic, indexical and symbolic).

Elsewhere, I’ve referenced Eliot’s line, “Between the idea and the reality, falls the shadow.” My students wrestled with this notion, a fact of the creative process, nowhere more evident than in the act of transforming a mental image into a physical artifact.

Although McCloud’s strict analysis of the six-steps of the comics’ creative processes has been roundly criticized (Spurgeon, 1999) there is something to be said for his notion of “surface” (McCloud, 1993, p. 171).

I’ve seen all my students struggle with this reality, of taking an “idea” and pushing it out, through form, idiom, structure, and craft to its final, physical manifestation in the tangible “surface” of the comics’ artifact.

I wrestle with this reality myself in producing these comics. Any single page, of rendering the visible print-ready “surface,” takes between two to four hours per page!

That’s why I am so impressed by my students’ work in these pages -- work that represents a high level of sustained engagement, much of it simply to render the all-important “surface.”

It’s always a relief for me when I can sit back and let my students’ work speak for itself, as in this next example from Tyrone.

From Chapter 7, “The Six Steps,” panel 3 (McCloud, 1993, p. 171)
Heck yeah!
Hey you wanna here a funny simile bro?

That's cold bro. You're really mean
You look like a plastic lawn chair.

Chairs stuck on a island
Phoenix, Charles, 2016, UMSL, p. 189

Tyrone's comic represented a continuation of his on-going series of comics dealing with "Two Chairs Stuck on an Island," and his first and only comic entirely composed on the computer. Three of Tyrone's five comics treated his two anthropomorphic characters. The comic reproduced on page 50 divides the landscaped page into two tiers of evenly spaced panels: three on the top and two, larger panels, in the lower tier. The first panel contains the bold-faced title "Chairs stuck on a island," beneath which two, simply rendered chairs sit beneath a palm tree on a minute, desert island.

Beginning in the comics' second tier at the bottom of the page, the first chair delivers the comic punch-line, "You look like a plastic lawn chair." In the comics' fifth and final panel, in the lower right corner of the page, the second chair responds, "That's cold bro. You're really mean."

Such attempts at humor were not accidental. Tyrone's irony and intentional use of humor demonstrate that he was thinking critically and creatively. Despite quixotic spelling, Tyrone displayed an understanding of the figures of speech in the comics he created.

Following the establishing shot, in the next panel the first chair asks of the second, "Hey you wanna here [sic] a funny simile bro?" The verbal response of the second chair is contained in the word balloon of the third panel, "Heck yeah!"

Tyrone's first comic treated personification. In Tyrone's third visit to the island, in a comic titled "Onomatopia," [sic] the sound emanating from the creaking chair #1 "Errrrr..." gives rise to the self-assessment, "Man, must be gettin old."

Few students in either of the studies moved back and forth between the two modes of production: computer or traditional paper and pen/pencil. Tyrone was one of three students who elected to compose both computer and traditional comics in the pilot study. Only two students made that transition in the second study. At the close of the pilot study I interviewed Tyrone on 2-27-15.
"I didn't want people to be like. What is that?"

"A palm tree."

"Yeah. It looks like a palm tree."

"And what kind of tree is that? It's green..."

"Explain the different colors you used."

"I used like tan and the pencil to do the sand and stuff. I used this [points at green] for the tree and just scribbled across the top of the tree..."

"And the ocean I used a point. I used... What's that?"

"A blue. A light blue."

"Yeah, the wash. The brush. The wash brush?"

"And what color did you use for the ocean?"

"The ocean."

"And the ocean used paint. I used. What's that?"

"A blue. A light blue."

"I noticed that you were the first person to use color... well you and that other girl [Cecilia]. Did it but you want to the computer and used color. Why did you want to use color?"

"Cause I wanted to make it look... like a beach as possible."

"I want a beach!"
"I remember your first comic. You had done the same kind of thing? And you had like started really fast, before anybody else. You already - you automatically knew where you were going. You were the first person to pick up a pencil and start your comic on the very first day we started - so... Why did you decide to like, stay with the chairs?"

"Cause I already knew what they was going to be saying and stuff. So, it would be easier just to stick with the same characters."

I remember when I read it, I laughed. I thought it was pretty clever, because he was making fun of him but it was also a simile. You picked 'plastic lawn chair.' That was your choice. Why did you pick 'plastic,' you could have said... 'You look like a king's throne...' or something... Why'd you pick 'plastic lawn chair?'"

"I don't know, cause they cheap. [Laughs.] They break easily."

"...I see that you chose to tell a traditional story. So why did you do that instead of - you know how we talked about - YOU actually talked about the difference between sequence and series* - some people just put pictures of totally unrelated things, but they were talking about simile or metaphor - but you chose to tell a story. So, why did you choose to tell a story instead of just pictures of people - saying a definition and then an example?"

"Well, I wanted to make the chairs like two boys tellin' their stories, two friends tellin' their stories..."

Tyrone's interview reminded me of my conversation with Penny. Fulfilling the dictates of an assignment was only part of the motivating force behind their comics production. Their storytelling impulse was central to their engagement with the task. In keeping with the dual coding theory, their prolonged, intense engagement breaking down and laying out imagery associated with the target vocabulary words built imagens* to accommodate long-term retention. At the same time, moving beyond the expression plane of alphabetic text to the visual modality called to mind the generative power of transmediation**

* see Tyrone's critique of India's "comics series" later in this issue.

...But as Cecelia and India's work demonstrates... There are other ways for comics to engage dual coding and transmediation!

* see issue #2 p. 7 (Pedro 1986); **see issue #2 pp. 16-18 (Siegel, 1995).
**Personification Comic**

- The paper is dancing on the table.
- The water asked me to fill it up, fill me up!
- The stars danced playfully in the moonlight.
- The alarm clock told me to wake up.
- The thunder grumbled like an old man.
- The flowers wafted in the gentle breeze.
- The fire ran wild!
- The pistol glared at me from its holster.
- **The End!**
On the first full working day of the pilot study I offered students a variety of pre-printed comics layouts. I also made available the use of my classroom computer and personal printer for those students who wished to design and print their own, original page layouts.

India was one of only two students in the pilot group of 16 participants who took the offer and printed her own, unique layout. India was the only student out of 31 (both studies) who employed the identical layout design for all six of the comics she produced.

The classroom was soon at work. Some students were creating their comics at their work stations on their computers. Others drew their panel frames and layouts on paper, free-handed. Several used the pre-printed templates I had provided. India designed and printed her own.

Daria (a pseudonym) followed India’s lead and printed her own layout which she used to create her first hand-drawn comic. With the exception of the printed, blackline panel frames, the comic was hand-drawn in pencil.

Subsequently, and for the remaining four comics that she ultimately created in the pilot study, Daria carefully drafted her rectilinear panel frames with a straight-edge and a pencil.

Viewing India’s comic to the left, you will see a mirror-image of the layout that she elected for all six of the comics that she created. The page was arranged in portrait orientation with a single banner panel or title header, running the width of the page from margin to margin.

The first “title” panel is followed by three tiers of three, square panels.
In my formal exit interview with India on 2.27.15, I asked her about her design of the layout and her use of the printer. "So, it seems like once you settle on an idea, you kind of carry it through. No one else did that. Everyone else looked different."

"I'm not saying they were bad, but yours had that same format. Why did you do that?"

"Yeah."

"Well, you mean like drawing my own boxes at stuff?"

The last panel of each comic contains the words "The END". The end carefully lettered across the frame. A sign of the formality of execution in her work is coded in the serifs that India adds to the lettering of her alpha text characters.

The remaining eight panels of each comic contain examples of the respective figures of speech along with iconic representations of each example. With the exception of her first comic titled "My Comic" (see page 37) with the target figure of speech being expressed, India's comics displayed the particular figure of speech carefully drawn in the first panel (frame).
"I think that's harder because the lines could be crooked and stuff, and they could mess up the whole comic, so I liked the boxes where you could fit everything in there."

"Yeah, you're one of the few people who actually printed out their own..."

"So, you showed me the one on personification. I noticed they all have the same kind of heading. I think it's very... It's almost like it's part of a book, or an album... they're all that [sic] same kind of look to them, but they're all different."

"...you kind of have a narrator, but, it's not really telling a story -- well, it tells a story about personification, but it's not like a character in each one."

Why did you choose to do it that way, instead of...?"

"Because I felt, that... the people were harder to draw."

"Oh..."

"So, I would just go with objects instead of people."

Perhaps I was wrong to suggest the objects in India's comics were not, or did not function as "characters." Nate drew a comic where a coffee mug and a cup "stand-in" for "off-screen" coffee shop patrons. Still, consideration of these unique cases goes beyond the scope of the present study. That said, within the bounds of conventional narrative and "story-telling," I did make several over-arching observations, during the first two weeks of the pilot study.

The first observation deals with characters. With the exception of the use of inanimate objects as "characters" and the special case of India's comics, I saw characters employed in several ways. Students used human characters, from stick figures to appropriated photographs of "real-life" celebrities. Other students took common objects and dealt with them fancifully, like the "cheap" plastic lawn chairs in Tyrone's comics or the anthropomorphic stars and birds in Cecelia's.

India's classmate, Daria, had developed such a character.
Similar things can be tricky.
Your bright like the sun.
I can't see!!

People use
similar:
all the time.
You're sharp as a knife.

Go speed the joy!!
The end.
While it may be a cause for celebration to reach “the end,” the space devoted to the image/text of the final panel in Daria’s layout threatens to overtake her first comic.

If one re-imagines Daria’s layout, it is possible to see how her comic may have been better served by a landscape orientation. For instance, the orphaned panel in the lower left hand corner does not seem to contribute to the overall narrative.

Daria abandoned the portrait orientation, creating her subsequent four comics in landscape format.

Daria created five of the six comics suggested for the pilot study. Her “pencil” character appears in each.

Just as Daria abandoned portrait orientation, she departed from her use of computer generated layouts, electing a pencil as the technology of choice to create the layout and breakdown of her remaining four comics.

Her pencil character functions as a perfect visual metaphor — emblematic of traditional school work and of the technology that Daria employs to “speak” to her readers.

My students were exploring and developing tools of literacy to meet the challenge of the over-arching task.

Single, stand-alone characters appearing only once, or ongoing, continuing characters appearing across multiple panels (and pages!)

A series of panels “connected” by subject-to-subject and aspect-to-aspect transitions or a narrative sequence “joined” by moment-to-moment and action-to-action transitions.

Compare the layouts of the following two comics, one from India and the pilot study, and another, created more than a month later, by Serenity during the second study.
Alienation

Mike's microphone made such music.

Jonquil uses umbrellas.

Issacs is interesting and imitating.

Hamans hopes to retell.

Glass grows greener in the graveyard.

The prince pressed the royal seal on the puppet puppet.

Starfish chomps night tuna out of the open tin of tuna.

Go and gather the green leaves in the lawn.

The End.
Crash

Max: oops, I broke this.

Emiley: What's that sound?

Donomatopia

If you broke something, I'ma tell Mom.

Mom: I'm Home!

But I didn't

Mom: In trouble now.
The layout designs by India and Serenity (compared side by side on pages 60 & 61, respectively) bear striking similarities: the page-spanning title-banner, the three-tier panel structure, the general uniformity of the panel spaces. Despite these similarities and despite the hand-drawn surface texture of the interior panel images, the reading experience is quite dissimilar.

Serenity has constructed a narrative grounded in the familial discourse of childhood responsibilities - homework, household chores, interfacing with parents and siblings. Serenity’s character Max appears in four of her five comics. The comics are notable for their humorous sequences, panels coded to indicate action-to-action and moment-to-moment transitions in the reader’s mind.

India’s comics present a stark contrast. Linked by subject-to-subject transitions, India’s comics present representative figures of speech in alpha text, with iconic representations.

Both artists succeed in meaningfully interrogating the target vocabulary words through the hybrid medium of their comics.
When we get comfortable in a lane, when we find a path that serves our interests (and which may have led to a desired destination in the past), we may hesitate to explore alternate routes.

As early as February 9, 2015 I was beginning to notice two types of comics being produced in class. As I noted in my teacher journal for 2-9-15, in a conversation with Cecelia, I encouraged her to try telling a "traditional narrative" through a sequence of panels. Similarly, I suggested she create a hand-crafted comic using paper and pencil.

Cecelia was a talented visual artist. She had earned a number of art awards in our district over the more than three years that I knew her. She worked in pencil, ink, and paint. Our building's art teacher and my collaborator, Ms. Alsace, and I both knew Cecelia was capable of creating comics with traditional media.

As early as February 9, 2015 I was beginning to notice two types of comics being produced in class. As I noted in my teacher journal for 2-9-15, in a conversation with Cecelia, I encouraged her to try telling a "traditional narrative" through a sequence of panels. Similarly, I suggested she create a hand-crafted comic using paper and pencil.

Cecelia was present on February 20, 2015, "Presentation Day." I focused my video camera at a white board and projected student comics for the class to critique. The respective artists narrated and answered questions (off camera) while I led the students through our peer review critique sheet.

"Hey! That's India's comic!"

"It was Tyrone."

"What?"

"She doesn't because she just... um... It's not like a sequence thing."

"No!"

"How about presentation? Overall visual impression. I'm up at the top now. Does she [India] demonstrate understanding of how comics work?"
A week later I was conducting exit interviews with those students who had completed a majority of the comics on the six figures of speech. On February 26, 2015, I interviewed Cecelia. She had elected to share her “series-type comic” on Onomatopoeia as her favorite among the six she created.

“Where did you get your idea for this comic?”

“Well, I got my ideas from – I was thinking ‘onomatopoeia’ and then I was thinking ‘Dinosaur!’ I don’t know, because dinosaurs are very, very majestic and strong and really loud.”

“You look at the whole comic and what’s your favorite part of the comic... ...if you had to pick a part?”

“I like the car. The car makes me happy, because it looks awesome.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. The cat doesn’t really express my feelings. Look, the cat just doesn’t stand out to me as much as the dinosaur and the car.”

“What is your least favorite part of your comic?”

“It does look like a cat.”

“The cat.”

VRMM

Mmm... Hmm...
"It say's meow."

"The car stands out better by the road and saying 'Vrmm Vrmm' and the dinosaur is standing tall and proud and saying 'Rawr.' The cat is just sitting there saying 'meow.'"

"Tell me what you would have done differently?"

"I would have chosen the cat... I would have changed the cat like or into a different position or something - or made the cat catch a mouse or something."

"Now, I see in your comic that... ...you don't really have a narrator - or do you? Is there any kind of narration?"

"No."

"But you do have characters, but they're different characters, from one to the next."

"Mmm Hmm."

"Um - do you remember we talked a little bit about different visual conventions that comics used? Just think of what comics are and what different conventions you have used."

"Well, what do you mean by that?"

"Well, things that you would see in a comic that you wouldn't see like in a book of writing. It's communicating something to us visually."

"Like it uses visualization, like you said. It also, from one picture to the next, it makes you think of what happens between the gutter... Like one of the lessons you told us about how - like peek-a-boo?"

"Uh huh?"

"...like you could visualize that between the gutter... ...and it makes you visualize in your head what goes on."

Cecelia was a student who clearly understood the concept of closure, of creating an imagined sequence across a series of panels. Although the pilot study was essentially complete, I asked once more about her choices.

"I see that you have not told a traditional story. Why didn't you tell a traditional story? Maybe stay with the car or stay with the dinosaur to begin? Why do you have all different ones?"

"I don't know. I had an idea going on. Some things you can't use for all the same things, like for example 'simile' - uh - I don't think it would have worked, in a way, I'm not sure... I think it was better to make it different."

"You mentioned that each one of these things makes characteristic sounds - different sounds. So, if you stayed with a car you'd be stuck with 'vrmm vrm' on each one?"

"Hmm hmm. It just kind of made a little more sense using different things, cause it would enrich the reader's attention - like..."
"Well, it's very effective. You did an outstanding job. Oh, and you used color, which really adds a lot to it."

"But tell me why you never did -- uh - and you didn't have to -- but why did you never draw one on paper -- because you're good with paper -- I've seen you draw on paper before. Why did you choose not to?"

"Cause I want to practice with the computer. I always practice at home with drawing and stuff..."

"...but I can't really practice on the computer. Cause, my [unintelligible] has a computer, but he doesn't really let me get on it."

"So, you don't have a computer to practice on at home?"

"Nnn Nnn... That's why I use all six of my definitions..."

"Yeah, well, they're outstanding."

"Thank you."

"I didn't know that you didn't have a computer at home. That's a pretty good reason, if that's your only chance to use it."

"Mmm Hmmm."

"...Yeah. Well, thanks a lot, Cecilia..."

Then and even now, thinking about Cecilia and the resources I took for granted, I recall the trope of the young radio announcer in the broadcast from Lakehurst, New Jersey upon the glorious approach of the Hindenburg nearly 80 years ago. My sense of triumph plunges... Oh, the humanity...

I know so little about my students. My efforts to understand and influence their literacy seem particularly small and ineffectual.

Cue orchestra.

Their comics, like shells strewn upon a shore, represent deep and complex life-stories coded within the still and silent frames...

"How will the use of comics promote 8th grade students' mastery of academic language with a focus on figures of speech?"

My AR study only scratches the surface of the meaning coded in my students' work and of comics' potential as a teaching and learning resource. That said, this hybrid art form and the tools of its analysis offer tremendous promise for future classroom instruction and research. I hope that much has come across the "waves" these past 4 issues.
Freddy? Freddy the Fritter? Is it you?

I was at a bistro in Southern France with Dr. "H" when Space Mike picked up a distress signal on your tracking device. Tracking device? What tracking device?

HIGH-TECH TRACKING DEVICE

How long have I been unconscious? I've been having the strangest dreams. We got the distress call about an hour ago. Came as fast as we could.

We figure you've been lost at sea, drifting around in circles for weeks! Lucky that you finally washed-up here!

What a trip!

Comics all over the beach...

Hey, Mike! Have you found what you were looking for?

Time to head home!
Not so fast, m’boy!

Now, what?

Discussion!

Discussion?

Oh, yeah!

NEXT TIME: DISCUSSION

To Be Concluded
Hello, and welcome to "Key Strokes," my send-up of the 1960's "letters to the editor" columns of many Silver-Age comic books.

As reactions to my online and print comics come in, I will continue to print comments, suggestions and criticism in these pages, the "traditional, alphatest" portion of our project.

***

Hi Mike,

I just finished reading your 4 comics—quite a clever way to write your dissertation. In the process of reading, I learned a lot about you, and your action research project of using comics to teach traditional academic vocabulary. I like how you wove in the history of comics, the process of writing a dissertation, practical as well as sophisticated aspects of creating comics, and humor. In your literature review, I loved the way you incorporated comic theoreticians and teacher/researchers as characters who directly address the reader. Your use of stories within stories is masterful. I enjoyed reading your honest portrayal of the process of doing your action research. Your research and analysis seemed amazingly thorough.

In your most recent issue, I continued to learn about the mechanics of comics though I found myself wanting to know more about your findings regarding your students' work—what you saw in their comics—and more examples of their work. Are you planning to include that in a future draft?

Have you read Ethic of Excellence by Ron Berger? I think that’s where I first learned about gallery walks. I also wondered if you’re familiar with the early childhood Reggio approach, the hundred languages of children, and Loris Malaguzzi. When I was reading your comics, both came to mind.

Kathy Lewis

To which I replied:

Dear Kathy:

Thanks very much for the kind words... As for student work. Yes, absolutely!!! I think I almost “jump the shark” putting it off so long in issue 4, but the last half of the issue will be that -- much less of me and much more of the students with plenty of examples and analysis. I am glad you noticed that significant missing piece.

Still planning to have the issue complete by Spring break.

Best,

Mike

P.S.: Not familiar with the book or authors you mention. They sound intriguing. As I may have mentioned, I first learned the formal term “Gallery Walk” from Dr. Rogers, my critical literacy professor in the Spring of 2015.

A note from Jessyca:

Hi Mike!

If I have to read one more comic... [smiling face emoji]. Seriously, I am amazed and in awe of how you are able to accomplish this! In each panel you not only provide the graphic novel illustrations; but, the information answering your dissertation questions, comments/notes, visuals, and the personal narratives to keep the reader engaged!! I am thrilled to see your student’s work also!!

I look forward to reading even more, and seeing me in your next issue!! Are you planning on including this class and our discussions in a future issue?

See you Thursday!

Jessyca

I sent additional pages (23-54) to Kathy Lewis for her feedback and received this response on 3-1-16.

Mike,

Your analysis of your students’ work seems thorough. Sharing snippets of your journal, showing the students’ work, then analyzing it, and including the interviews gives the reader a clear idea of how you carried out your research and analyzed your findings. You included some of the challenges you faced and problem solving necessary, like setting guidelines for acceptable language, and accommodating the inclusion of another class of students, which shows some of the issues that inevitably have to be
dealt with when doing research in a dynamic classroom.

A couple of things to think about—some of the handwritten notes and the text in Cecelia’s small panel in the upper right hand corner on page 46 are hard to read.

You’ve captured your classroom in words and images, along with the qualities of sustained engagement and determination you observed in your students, the personalities of a few of them, some of the challenges you encountered, the value of data gathering, journaling and reflection, and what you’ve accomplished in your action research. What you’ve done is quite amazing.

See you Thursday,
Kathy

Thanks to Kathy for her encouraging words. Kathy mentioned her interest in action research and told me she had purchased Action Research for Teachers: Traveling the Yellow Brick Road, (2009) by Holly, Arhar and Kasten. This was a book I had referenced in Issue 3: Methods. I mentioned my special debt to the book by Hendricks (2013) Improving schools through action research: A reflective practice approach. I was shocked to discover that I had failed to include Hendricks in my list of references. (See reference in this issue). Ah, the perils of serial production and self-publishing! And the priceless benefit of finding someone to read and share their impressions of your writing!

References


Steranko, J. (1968). Nick Fury, Agent of Shield, 1(3).


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Additional Photographic Images

Page 17

Famous Funnies #1 accessed at:
See also: Gerber, Vol 1 page 248

New Fun #1 accessed at:
http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/New_Fun_Comics_Vol_1_1

Page 24

Crowd scene accessed at:

***
“Freddy the Fritter.” A memento I crafted in the early 1970's.

View of my Computer Literacy classroom in the K-8 public school where I conducted the pilot and 2nd group studies between March and April of the 2014-2015 academic year.

As part of his regular building duties, one of my collaborators, Mr. Xavier (a pseudonym) encouraged all teachers to post new student work in the hallways each month. Here is part of the display I assembled for April of 2015, with comics from the 2nd Group.
As much as the importance of the site in the trapezoidal panel, the image that will inhabit a given panel is always already partly determined by the panel's formal structure. An image set in side a diamond,

Adapted from: "The form of the support: the image co-ordinates without wishing than denying or contradicting it," (Greaser 1997, p. 46).

Just as one builds a wall with bricks, a multiframe is also constructed more easily by taking and on rectilinear pieces that are cut on right angles.

Yes the good old rectangle or square. Other shapes cannot compete on their neighbors. Cartoon: I know this well. They recognized...

For more space for the infusion...

Compare this preliminary sketch from February 2016 with the finished pages 21 and 22.
Compare this preliminary sketch from early March 2016 with the finished pages 69 and 70.
Frey and Fisher are educators who pioneered the use of comics in the classroom and championed the need for educational decision-makers to adopt an expanded view of literacy. Here, they edit a practical guide to develop students' visual literacy.

Seidman's excellent, step-by-step guide to using interviewing as a scientific research tool.

Will Eisner was one of the giants of comics history. Many scholars argue that he created the first "graphic novel."

"Comics and Sequential Art" predates Scott McCloud's "Understanding Comics" by nearly a decade! "Must" reading!

Hey, I missed you guys this issue, but I was there in the background! This book of essays goes to the head of the class for anyone interested in teaching the "graphic novel."

Charles Hatfield's essay on how we define comics is a great starting place in this great, practical book!
Comics in the 21st Century Classroom
visit us at: classroomcomics.net

The widening gyre:
Discussion of an action research study
using comics to teach academic vocabulary

Mike Phoenix
Robert Overstreet's price guide first appeared in 1970 and changed the face of the comicbook collecting hobby. This cover from May 2008 showcases two characters which now belong to Disney. Disney also purchased Marvel Comics. It's all chronicled in "Overstreet," now in its 46th year!

The undergrounds gave rise to the direct market sales model and birthed the "graphic novel." Following Overstreet, the late Jay Kennedy painstakingly researched the undergounds and produced his guide in 1982. Although prices have risen, the book remains an indispensable research tool.

Gerber's 2-volume Golden-Age Photo-Journal Guide and his companion Marvel guides, have a place on the shelf of every comics historian!

Attend one of the nation's oldest comic book shows!
Founded in 1976 in St. Louis, MO. 40 years and going strong!
How are you on charcoal, Freddy?

I don't like the sound of that, Space Mike!

But I could use a step-stool!
Medium-rare, 135 degrees internal temperature. Do the math, you two! Who's running this ship, Harley? I thought you said these guys were tech-savvy?
Despite their differences, the doctors arrive at a meeting of the minds. These two titans of their respective qualitative and quantitative approaches to scientific inquiry, embark upon a joint-venture -- a "web-based," K-12 academy!
At the fantail.

Couldn’t sleep. Just back here, thinking about where we’ve been.

You sure spend a lot of time thinking about comics.
Newsstand distribution of comics, a national distribution system that helped define the comic book (with the release of Famous Funnies #1 in May of 1934), began to fade away in the 1970's. It was Phil Seuling, a high school teacher and comics fan from New York who cut deals with the major comic book publishers and introduced the world to direct market sales in 1974.

Based on the direct sale of underground comics in the late sixties to "head shops" on the West Coast, Seuling cut-out the middle-man. It remains the sales-model to this day!

Between 1973 and 1993 the number of these comic book specialty store skyrocketed from 100 to over 7,000 (Duin & Richardson, 1998). The 1990's began the great comic-book boom. Speculation was fueled by collectors and dealers hoping to make fortunes by quick returns on investment. The same is true of the greedy publishers who over-saturated the market with product (Howe, 2012). The bubble burst in the mid-1990's. Thousands of comic book stores closed their doors. Comic publishers merged or filed for bankruptcy. Distributorships closed or merged (Beerbohm & Olson, 2004).

By 2000, only Diamond Distributors remained, a virtual monopoly on the distribution of comic books in the United States. But it was a changed landscape: today, print-runs of comic books, once measured in the hundreds of thousands, seldom exceed 50,000, and sales of all comics have steadily declined and show a continuing, year-to-year decline despite their continued popularity in film and other media (Johnston, 2010).

It's amazing to see the way technology has changed -- particularly since the advent of the Internet -- its influence "accelerated," you might say, in a single lifetime.

"Times they are a changin'"

I'm thinking about comics. Of course, they never recovered from the "Golden Age" of the 1940's, when 25 million copies were selling each month, but since the resurgence of comics in the late 1950's and the start of the Silver Age, I've seen comics become tremendously successful.

In the "old days," newsstand dealers tore-off the title banners from the covers of unsold comics and returned them to the publishers for credit. In the direct market system of the 1970's, the comic book shop owners purchased comics out-right. There was a lot of liability, but if they followed the "product" and knew their customers well, they could tailor their orders for high value sell-through of popular titles and characters.

Say what your want! Many of the dealers were themselves comic book fans. They could pre-order, receive huge discounts and get their comics weeks ahead of the newsstand dealers!

The brave new world of electronic screens.

So, how old are you? Me? Oh, not a day over 500! I was swimming with the plankton when moveable type was the hot, new thing!
500 years! Wow, Freddy, that sure puts my work into perspective! But I tell you, when I look back, it seems so long ago that I crossed that mountain pass and began my Introduction in June of 2015!

Sure does, Mike. Even for a five centuries old, giant clam, looking back to our meeting at the Hall of Teacher PD in issue #2 last October, seems like a lifetime ago!
I'll never forget our over-land hike to methods. The spiraling paths, the switchbacks and my getting lost in the dark wood!

Not the first time that Dr. "H" came along and set you on the road again! And look, the dock where you set out for the Isle of Findings... Seeing it now, it's really a peninsula -- not an "island" at all...
Yep, as it turns out, knowledge is interconnected. The metaphor of my findings as part of a peninsula, rather than an island, supports that notion. It was serendipitous that I used the well-worn literary metaphor of the journey with its imagery of roads and pathways to embody the story of my action research study.

The comics’ spatio-topia, that is, its operation through physical space, is well suited to a narrative scheme dependent on themes and associations bound-up with travel, departure, arrival, pathways and obstacles.

Good old serendipity.

So, Mike, when are you going to start your discussion section?

It says here, “Open the Discussion section with a clear statement of the support or non-support of your original hypotheses...” (APA, 2012, p. 35).

Well, I didn’t really have one. I mean, it was fairly well established in the research that comics, in-so-far as they embody non-linguistic representations, would help my participants master our target vocabulary words...

Sounds like an hypothesis...

I’ve been interested in looking at HOW work with comics leads to mastery of the target vocabulary.

Oh, I see. So, that’s why your discussion section opens with a barbecue?

Barbecue!!!?

Here, let me see that!
A little late for that now, don’t you think?

Perhaps, but I’ve managed to stay fairly close to the manual in spirit!

So, now you're getting metaphysical?

It says right here on page 35 that I might have combined this issue with issue #4.

"Issue...?" What "issue?" You ARE going off the deep-end, Mike!

"When the discussion is relatively brief and straightforward, some authors prefer to combine it with the Results section called Results and Discussion" (APA, 2012, 35).

Too late for that! That’s only one of the drawbacks of serial production!

So, we’re done here?

I’ve shown how the AR Method informed my work and improved my teaching over two iterations of my formal research study using comics as a teaching learning resource. I trust it is not lost on my fellow practitioners that they might replicate my study, or employ the AR method in their own classroom contexts.

After Marzano (2004) I’ve utilized a non-linguistic resource to support traditional, classroom instruction. In the spirit of McCandless (1993) and Sousanis (2015), I’ve employed an historically marginalized mode of communication (comics) to support my argument and undergird my analysis of comics and how my students employed this hybrid medium to master academic, state-tested, alpha text vocabulary words.

Over the past several issues, I’ve demonstrated the “spiraling” act, evaluate, reflect method of teacher action research (Hendricks, 2013, 11).

And your other multi-panel "talking head" speech -- the one on the history of comics' direct market back on page 5 -- that was all a set-up for where we’re headed?

So, Mike... You brought us back to the old fan tail to "look back" at where we’ve been...

You could say that.

A visual metaphor...

Future directions! Right?

I guess that means we move to the front of the ship!
There's nothing like the physical act of turning a page to reinforce the illusion of forward momentum.

And left to right, from the established to the new!

WUP WUP WUP

Got to catch a meeting back on the mainland! Good luck with your discussion! I'm sure it will go splendidly!
There they go, two brilliant doctors of philosophy, representing the entire spectrum of scientific inquiry, off to make the next great, transformative discovery in education!

You don’t look very happy about it. Just think! In some small way you’ll be able to make a contribution, too — implementing their research findings in your school district, in your very own school building!

They do great work, no doubt, but why should I wait for them to solve my problems?! See, I can conduct scientific research in my own classroom!

Hey! Either of you seen Dr. “H” or Dr. Noir? I left them in the control room last night. The ship’s running on auto-pilot!
Two years ago, when asked to define "Literacy," I replied, "Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening." Since that time, I have embraced a broader definition.

The "Ascent" of Man
An iconic diagram, offensive to some, overly simplistic to others.
Whether human beings emerged from the mind of God or from a star-crossed puddle of primordial enzymes, the story of human consciousness maps to the development of our technology.

Part of some traveling exhibit. Never seen it before.

Where'd this thing come from...?

Dunno...

Only moments later in the control room of the mighty craft.*

Thanks again, guys, for giving me this lift. I really think it's time for a new venue!

Happy to help, Mike.

I think we have the perfect place in mind for your discussion!

*compare this panel image with the one in Issue #2, page 28

*it came from Issue #1, page 15
Rockets to power! Turbines to speed!

Moments later and halfway around the world...

swoosh!
Phoenix, Charles, 2016, UMSL, p. 233

Sunday, 3:00 A.M.

Precisely 5 minutes later...

In the lobby of Dave's Public Access Television Studio...

Okay! We got the Fritter Party booked from 3:00 to 4:00 AM.

That's us! The boys will be right in!

Why don't you go ahead up onto the set, Mr. Fritter, and we'll get started!
That's right, folks! It's the Freddy the Fritter Show with Freddy the Fritter!

Let's put our hands together and welcome Freddy's special guest, all the way from a major midwestern city, middle-school teacher, Mr. Mike Phoenix!

Hello, Mike and welcome to the show!

Thanks, Freddy!

Well, let's get right down to it, shall we?

Sure...

I've heard it said that you began this so-called "teacher action-research study" of yours without any formal hypothesis! What's with that?!
I had a general idea, based on Marzano’s (2004) call for students to create “non-linguistic representations” of target vocabulary words, that my work with comics would help students learn figures of speech.

When you say “learn,” what do you mean?

That my students master vocabulary at a deeper level than a mere “textbook approach” (Peters, 1975, p. 90). I mean for my students to be able to use the words, to define them, identify examples, create their own figures of speech and employ them in context.

And do you think you were successful?

As a measure of gain between pre and post-test composite scores... Yes... But also as a qualitative measure of my students’ interaction with the target words in creating their own, original comics.

Another word or two on your quantitative data...

Certainly...

You report a 36 percent gain between pre and post tests in your pilot study and a 104 percent gain in your second study.

Yes.

You’ve argued that these adjustments to your teaching contributed to the higher gains...

Yes. I was better organized the second time out.

I had clearer expectations, communicated more effectively, and was more intentional.

And you maintain that in creating comics-based “non-linguistic representations,” your students generated mental imagery, Pavo’s “nonverbal objects, events, and behaviors” (Pavio, 1986, p. 53).* This imagery helped students retain and access working definitions of the target vocabulary?

Sure. That’s a good way to put it.

*also see issue #2, p. 7.
The act of transmediation -- of moving from the purely verbal, alpha text-based expression plane to the visual -- that also contributed to learning.*

In what sense?

I believe that transmediation fostered additional generative associations for the students.*

Visual associations?

Yes, and others, as well. In-so-far-as comics is a multimodal, hybrid medium, employing iconic, symbolic, and indexical signs, the students' production of the comics' surface mirrors the sustained engagement and multifaceted nature of word definition embraced by the Frayer Model of concept development (1969).

And would you do anything differently if you had to do over again?

That hypothetical question is difficult to answer. I learned about my particular students in a particular classroom context. I might do things differently with a new group of students. In that sense, yes -- I would like to investigate the use of comics as a teaching and learning resource again.

I'd like to see the study replicated with a much larger group of participants. It would be interesting to conduct a study with different age groups. One might develop additional and new mini-lessons, introduce a "graphic novel" reading group to help students analyze and critically consider comics' narrative techniques. I'd be interested in teaching other target vocabulary words and concepts beyond the six figures of speech I used.

Now, you mentioned some time ago* that as you began to analyze your data at the conclusion of the studies, you developed something of an hypothesis?

Yes. Early in the first study I began to see two different "types" of comics appearing spontaneously among the student work: what we identified as comics of a "series" and those of a "sequence" type.

I suspected that comics of a more traditionally "narrative" type, that is, those predominantly of the "sequence" variety, might correlate with a higher degree of gain, measured as the difference between the pre and post-test scores.

But after you conducted your analysis, you saw no correlation?

Correct. None. Still, perhaps with a larger study, say, with 100 participants and, perhaps, 600 student comics, I might end with a different result.
But in your studies, that is, the ones that you actually conducted — to the extent that you developed your hypothesis, how do you explain that there was no apparent correlation?

The comics of both types, the "series" and "sequence" comics, both contained non-linguistic representations of the target vocabulary words. In his six steps to effective vocabulary instruction, Marzano (2004) never proscribed exactly what type of non-linguistic representation the student had to create — only that it be non-linguistic. Now, this is presumably visual, but one may envision other modalities that might be employed: dance and music, for example.

As many comics theoreticians have made clear over the course of my additional reading in the field, whether of the "series" or "sequence" variety, comics exhibit a high degree of cohesion across panels, due to comics' innate, "iconic solidarity" (Groensteen, 1999/2007, p. 20).

"Iconic solidarity." That's a fancy term.

It's Groensteen's. Simply put, it means that we read comic panels as interconnected by convention. In a sense, narrativity is coded into comics' very fabric. Groensteen would mention the "readerly function" of the comics panel.*

Absolutely!

I believe you mentioned McCloud's moment-to-moment and action-to-action transitions as predominate in the "sequence" type of comics you observed.

And the subject-to-subject and aspect-to-aspect transitions in those comics of the "series" types.

* (Groensteen, 1999/2007, p. 53) and see issue # 4 p. 23

I came to that approach much later. I had originally operationalized elements within the panels. For instance: multiple and continuing characters, dialogue, a recurring sense of setting or place -- what one might call traditional "story elements." But this view was really just another side of the same coin.

Echoing Rosenblatt's reader response theory (1978), the reader mentally fills in the gaps between the comics' panels (1978). It's McCloud's sense of closure, the reader's inference based on individual, context-based, interpretation of the panel image on either side of the empty gutter.

Well, Mike we seem to be re-tracing some well-trodden ground... So, if there isn't anything else...?

Well, I was thinking of using some of the methods of my study to explore other academic words. For instance, Larry Bell's (2005) 12 Powerful Words.
There are many lists -- comprised of words such as: evaluate, predict, infer, compare and contrast, etc. I started teaching at a new building in my district this year.* Our administration is mandating that we teach Bell's list of words to all our students in advance of the annual, high-stakes, state assessment that begins later this month.

I see comics or graphic novels being used in K-12 ELA classrooms. I'd like to explore an interdisciplinary approach with a science, math or social studies teacher. Imagine a group of teachers collaborating with an art teacher and an ELA teacher (or another language teacher or an instructor whose students' second language is English) and perhaps a teacher like me who is simply interested in comics.

We could use comics in the classroom alongside traditional alpha-text resources. Students could create stories, reports and essays in comics format.

*2015-2016 academic year

We could really explore Groensteen's spatio-topia, building on a survey of representative mentor texts and extending our classwork across long-form, multi-page comics created by the students.

Well, Mike, you certainly seem hopeful about the prospects for comics' future in education.

Yes... That is, yes and no...

...and "no?"

How's that?
I'm somewhat concerned about the future.

That's typical of many educators; but in what way are you concerned?

Two years ago in a literature review, I wrote about the possibility of comics in the classroom being used as a bridge to the electronic, multimodal texts of the 21st Century (Phoenix, 2014).

A year later in my reading, I learned that I wasn't the first educator to share that view.

A case of independent discovery?

In 2012, Frank Serafini concluded an article "...by discussing how two print-based texts, in particular contemporary and postmodern picturebooks and graphic novels, may serve to bridge the chasm from the traditional literacies and print-based texts that dominate schools today, to the multimodal, visual, and digital texts of the new millennium" (p. 27).

Compare Serafini to what I wrote, independently, two years later: "The comics medium could serve as one useful bridge for students and classroom teachers in the transition away from the mode of physically printed type, to the transcendent, digital modes of the 21st century" (Phoenix, 2014, p. 44).

Remarkable, that you both came to the same conclusion, but what's the problem?

We can argue the merits of studying and celebrating comics as an end in itself. We can point to comics as a means to various ends: scaffolding second language learners, motivating reluctant readers, preparing reader/viewers for the multimodal electronic screen world of a fast-approaching future... but comics...? ...the comics as we have known them since they first appeared...?

Yes...?

Already a thing of the past.

What?!

Members of the New London Group (1996) predicted much of what we see today. Profound change that has shaped and re-shaped the meaning of literacy...

...the explosion of multiliteracies, globalization, and the exponential and transformative growth of telecommunications, computing power, and the pervasiveness of the World-Wide-Web!
These new societal realities have exerted a centripetal pull on the literate practice of the modern student. The disconnect between the literacy practiced “in” and “out-of-school” is evident in today’s urban K-12 classrooms!

One may view the democratization of the public forum, the promulgation of competing discourses, and the exposure to new ideas and markets as a boon or a threat.

Freddy, you’ve seen the arc of printing technology in your own lifetime. Comics are a recent development. Even now, as the age of print on a physical page recedes, we see many in academic circles redirect their wrath from the comic book of past decades toward the multimodal texts of video games, smartphones and wireless tablets, the next great technological threat to school-house literacy!

Lewis and Fabos (2005) might have included comics when they wrote that “Literacy has always employed available technologies -- stylus, pen, printing press, and now digital code. However, once a technology becomes commonplace, people tend not to think of it as technological” (p. 475).

Comics once represented a modern marvel of mass communication made possible by revolutions in printing technology and automobile-age distribution. Stories, entire worlds represented in color -- produced, not by and for the nation’s ruling elite, but by a new, immigrant class of artists and publishers and created for the common citizenry and the least powerful.

Such technology was seen as a threat to the mission of the school and banned, mercilessly, at the school-house door.

I see the same scenario repeated now, 50 years later, in my large, urban school district where the prevailing “out-of-school” techno-literacy of the “modern-age” is viewed as threatening to the district’s academic mission.

Each year, hundreds of potentially productive hours are spent policing the ban on personal cell phones -- which now, in many cases, parents demand that children bring to school, but which, never-the-less, must be collected each morning and redistributed at the close of each school day.
Some progressive districts have managed to put systems in place whereby the power of these electronic devices is actually harnessed for positive pedagogical purposes. One day, perhaps soon, that may happen in my district.

In the meantime, comics may serve as that metaphorical bridge -- from traditional, print-based alpha text, to the new, multimodal reality whose centripetal pull away from a single, national literacy is likely only to accelerate.

Hope? Of course! The New London Group (1996) raised many of these concerns twenty years ago. For every potentially negative outcome brought on by these tectonic, technological upheavals, the New London authors provide positive alternatives -- if only educatational decision-makers (and the communities they represent) adopt a responsive and appropriate pedagogy.

A *pedagogy of multi-literacies?* (p. 64).

*see issue #2 (pp. 10-11)*

Exactly! Comics as they exist today, and in whatever form they assume in the future (despite the decline of comics' direct market and the general collapse of traditional printing) may yet have a part to play.

It captures the potentially dark side of our technology.

Folks used to say the same things about comic books!

What's with the epigram on the cover of this issue?

"Turning and turning in a widening gyre?"

How so?

Touché! Yep...

Yeats?

We may enjoy unity in the virtual life-worlds made possible by our electronic screens (Gee, 2004). On the other hand, those same screens may promote isolation, alienation, fragmentation.

...But that's why parents, mentors -- teachers still have a decisive role in education...

...At least until Dr. Noir perfects his horde of robot educators!

Heh, heh...
In the next instant, with a blast from Freddy’s Late Night Orchestra...

Hey, look everybody! Here comes the author of Understanding Comics! It’s Scott McCloud (1993)!

Psst... Freddy, should I just scoot over here...?

You want I should draw you a diagram? Shhh!!

Get over here, Scott, and have a seat! It’s an honor to have such a great comics practitioner and theoretician on the show! The whole discussion of modern comics theory really started with you!
Soon...
Fred, you're the coolest clam I've ever met!
Thanks Scotty, but say, let's give it up for that old friend of the show, Professor Charles Hatfield!

At length...
And now, folks... Let's welcome Ashley Dallacqua, Neil Cohn, Thierry Groensteen and Sylvia Pantaleo!

30 minutes later...

Some time later...
Comics practitioners, theoreticians, critics, educators, publishers, fans, and soon, members of the general public are summoned to the stage by the merry mollusk!
Hey, Mac... Where you want these folding chairs?

Huh?

We can bring another rack of ten if you need 'em. I'll just need you to sign for these.

Me? Sign for "chairs"?

It ain't my discussion! You want people should sit on the street?!

Well, I have a plane to catch. Really liked your Kirby retrospective!

Thanks, Scott! Nice talking to you!

We'll meet at Neil's cognitive psych lab and do lunch. Yes, the New London Group! All ten! Is that awesome or what?!

Hey, what the...?! Freddy! Freddy, the Fritter! What are you doing out here?!

Who's hosting?!

I don't know, but she's interviewing Bakhtin on the dialogic nature of consciousness!

Bakhtin...?! But he's...

Take a lunch break and we'll get back to it!

"Back to it?" But isn't this "it?" I mean, isn't this...???
A delicious, all-beef American hotdog, slattered in kraut, relish and DIJON mustard!

Dr. "Hi?" What the...

Now, now... You knew I'd return. Didn't you?

Not really, but where's Dr. Nair?

They've had another falling-out!

Suddenly from the shadows, a sleek form emerges into the sunlight.

Road trip!

We'll get you home. You hug your wife and kids. Take a shower. Throw a party for your friends and family, and we'll head out again!

Buckle-up, kiddo! Let's see where your next action research study using comics in the classroom takes us!
KEY STROKES

Hello, and welcome, once more, to "Key Strokes," my send-up of the 1960's "letters to the editor" columns of many Silver-Age comic books.

As reactions to my online and print comics come in, I will continue to print comments, suggestions and criticism in these pages, the "traditional, alphatext" portion of my project.

***

Hi Mike!

I have thoroughly enjoyed reading about your journey at [our Midwestern university] in comic book form! When you first proposed the idea, I wondered how you would be able to do it. I had no idea the amount of work and dedication required to capture and illustrate a proposal in comic book/graphic design. Your strengths as an illustrator and the perspectives drawn have remained constant from the beginning in issue #1 throughout issue #5. The techniques have helped the reader identify with and relate to the characters and their importance to the story.

The other day with my fourth graders, we analyzed and told a story using only the pictures. The imagery and the details were just as important as the printed text. They were amazed to see how we were able to tell the story without reading a word of text. I was surprised by the significance of their conversations. They were engaged and more vocal in their conversations. Without having to grapple and decode the printed text, they were able to tell the story, express themselves, and tell the story with the important elements of storytelling. The same methods are conveyed in your use of imagery and type. By "reading" the pictures, one is able to retell and follow along with the story, make predictions, and comprehend what the story is about.

I like the discussion format of a talk show! It was ingenious, and creative. By using this format it's familiar to the reader; the reader instantly knew a discussion was to be held, and it provides structure for an enlightening and lively informal conversation where viewpoints and information may be shared.

By using comics, the reader has an enhanced connection with the story. Using comics to describe your journey, makes the story interesting, engaging, and inspiring!! I think it's great! Wishing you continued success on your journey!

Sincerely,

Jessyca B.

Thanks to Jessyca who has offered her steadfast encouragement throughout these three years.

Kathy writes...

Hi Mike,

I enjoyed reading your discussion, as well as your illustrations. I find it interesting that you didn't start out with a hypothesis, but rather that it evolved over the course of the study. I liked the talk show format you included as part of your discussion.

Your discussion is thoughtful both in terms of your reflection on your action research and your findings, as well as your thoughts about how the use of comics as a teaching and learning resource could be expanded. I like your ideas about integrating comics with different age groups, K-12 ELA classrooms, different disciplines, and introducing graphic novel reading groups. I think you've shown that integrating comics has potential for reaching more students with different learning styles and abilities. I love your idea that students could create stories, reports and essays in a comic format. You've certainly shown how that is possible by doing your dissertation as a series of comics. I like seeing both your finished work and the sketches of what's to come.

Great job!

See you Thursday:
Kathy

At least a portion of Kathy and Jessyca's motive in faithfully writing to Key Strokes in past issues may be that we are all assigned as writing partners in a writing course! Every three weeks over this Spring
2016 semester we exchange drafts of our writing projects, respond in writing, and then meet on campus (on Thursdays) to discuss our work.

Here is a reply I wrote to Kathy. I used the occasion to go on a bit about my 5-issue project.

Dear Kathy:

Thank you so much, again, for taking the time to read my work and offer your kind words. It has been very encouraging to hear back from someone who has gone beyond the surface of the pages.

Having cited numerous topics and visual techniques, revealed only through at least a casual -- but actual -- reading of the comics text, you write with obvious authority on my intended “meaning” coded therein.

I have not read a lot of negative commentary -- that is, suggestions for improvement, etc., beyond your questions a time or two ago about some of the low resolution images and the need for more student examples (Issue 4). I hope I have addressed these.

I suspect that “redundancy” is a chief failing of the over-all work. I wanted this dissertation to reflect the entire 3 year experience of working toward the new, “CPED Dissertation in Practice,” and certainly wanted to capture the process of teacher action research and my actual, formal research study. It became clear that I would need close to a year to complete such a task if I were to follow the path of the necessarily labor-intensive route of creating the dissertation in comics format. For those reasons I chose the serial format -- and cling to the traditional, five-chapter structure.

So, again, while I get a lot of coverage, I sacrifice a great deal, too. As Charles Hatfield writes: “Serialization may influence the very structure of the graphic novel, as it encourages authors to build discrete episodes, linked by thematic and motific repetition, rather than tightly structured, overarching plotlines” (2005, p. 154).

Months and months ago, Dr. Singer argued that I should do the comics, but in a shorter work, aimed at teachers. Attempting that now, at the end of the semester would be quite possible (given another semester), but “months and months ago” I did not know what I know now. I had not read enough, thought enough, pondered enough, or written enough. So, again, serialization made this work possible. As Gee remarks, I learned a great deal about my subject “just in time” (2004, p. 74). (Reminds me of teaching high school math in a logging town in 1979, where my reading each night kept me just a day ahead of my students.)

In reference to superhero comics, gathered together in “graphic novels,” Hatfield writes: “To read a single volume... is to be reminded of just how discontinuous the experience of reading a monthly serial really is, for each successive chapter includes much redundant exposition as well as brief, teasing glimpses of subplots still gestating” (2005, p. 155).

Yes, this has been quite a protracted birth. I take solace in Ann Dyson’s remark about the way young children learn, “In this way we will begin to understand, appreciate, and allow time for the often messy, noisy, and colorful process of becoming literate” (1986, pp. 407-408).

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References


An early sketch of some of the key images running through my mind as I began this issue. Notice the calendar. Ever mindful of deadlines, I plotted the number of pages I would need to complete each week to stay “on course.” This particular calendar shows March 6 through May 5, 2016. I had essentially completed Issue #4 on March 6 and began this issue on Saturday, March 12 when I drew the cover, based on the image of the “widening gyre,” about which I had been day-dreaming for several weeks. I completed this issue, essentially, today, 4-13-16.
Sketch for page 25. The major “talking head” portion of this comic (pp. 17-23) was plotted around the dialogue. Pages 24-28 were “broken down” around an image of human interaction — the gag of Mike’s being moved aside as more and more guests join the conversation/discussion. Page 26 was created to allow for the “page-turn” reveal of Dr. H on the “new” verso page 28.
Jim Steranko took the comics industry by storm. He took page design to a “new level” in the 1960’s. Already a successful “ad-man and publisher,” by the 1970’s, having accomplished just about everything he had wanted to do in the comics industry, he left the daily grind of producing a monthly title. He left fans with a wealth of incredible comics and his deeply personal, two-volume history.

Don’t look at this one without your parents’ permission, but underground comics artist Robert Crumb hit mainstreet in this “toned-down” anthology released by mainstream, publishing juggernaut Ballantine Books in 1970. I was 14, and the book changed my view of what comics could be and do!

My first, and for years, my most prized book “about comics.” It was from British authors. European comics scholarship had a five to ten year head-start over the Americans. Ironic, since modern comics began in the United States! This survey, published in 1967, included a chapter on Marvel Comics. Wow! I was eleven years old and I loved the book!

How and why do we communicate? Why should kids have to learn all these “academic words?” Maybe it’s time to have a frank, age-appropriate discussion with your students? At some level, even in comics, power relationships are a component of the discourse. Consider the “critical framing” of your own pedagogical approach (New London Group, 1996, p. 65). In the fall of 2014, my cohort took an intense, eye-opening, semester-long course in Social Justice and Education. Our professor used this excellent text as a key resource.