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Image, Text, and Story: Comics and
Graphic Novels in the Classroom

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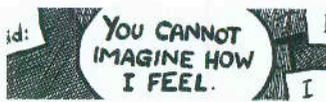
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BY RACHEL MARIE-CRANE WILLIAMS

Comics and graphic novels are powerful teaching tools; reading and making comics encourages students to become more skilled at critically consuming and creating texts that examine complex concepts (Frey & Fischer, 2004; Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002; Berkowitz & Packer, 2001). Students and teachers can use comics to examine personal experiences in the form of narratives related to empowerment and empathy. Brent Wilson (2005) agreed that embracing comics is one way to blur the boundaries between visual culture, the classroom, and the practice of contemporary studio artists. In this article, I present a rationale for comics in the classroom, discuss the connection between comics and the "Art" world, and share information about my experience teaching comics. Finally, I make a case for why comics are the perfect medium for crossing boundaries, creating empathy, and educating students about the artistic production and consumption of powerful texts.



Pairing visual images with words is an easy way to help students develop stronger visual literacy. Comics offer an opportunity for students to scrutinize how interdependent images and words can create a strong sequential narrative.



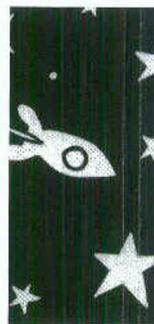
Image, Text, and Story:

Why Comics?

There are at least three reasons why comics and graphic novels are useful teaching tools: (1) there is a great deal of student interest in this genre; (2) they are inexpensive to obtain; and (3) the vocabulary is not difficult so they are easy to read (Wright & Sherman, 1999). Most important in the art room, comics create opportunities for teachers to engage students in meaningful discussions about visual perception, drawing and design, art history, and content on multiple levels (Berkowitz & Packer, 2001).

Teachers who skillfully use comics and graphic novels in their curriculum present numerous opportunities for students to deconstruct these texts on multiple levels. This layered deconstruction may include examining the story; the creator's intention, characters, and context; as well as the relationship between the design, words, and images. While words, images, layout, and story are all elements in these texts, none dominate the act of "reading." Students are usually comfortable decoding (reading) the visual system of letters and words. Pairing visual images with words is an easy way to help students develop stronger visual literacy. Comics offer an opportunity for students to scrutinize how interdependent images and words can create a strong sequential narrative. These texts do not dictate what students notice first, how or what they "read." Like scanning a work of art, the reader can decide where to begin and how long to look. Readers can choose to look at the words or the images first, or take the page in all at once as an integrated design.

Comics and Graphic Novels in the Classroom



Comics, Visual Culture and Wilson's Three Cultural Sites

In most classrooms there is a gap between the work of artists in the contemporary art world, popular culture/art, and the curriculum taught in typical K-12 art classroom and at the post-secondary level (Gude, 2000, 2007). Comics are one way to enter what Brent Wilson categorized as space between the school and the realms of contemporary art and popular visual culture: a para-site alongside the main site (Wilson, 2005). "In this site students would be encouraged to play intertextually between the conventional content of their art classes and the things that interest them from popular visual culture" (Wilson, 2003, p. 225). According to Wilson, teaching visual culture provides a bridge between the traditional art classroom and the world of images in which children are gladly submerged. This art/literary form presents an opportunity for students to explore stories, art, time, design, aesthetics, culture, history, and manual and computer techniques for image making (Frey & Fisher, 2004).

Comics, the Classroom, and the "Art" World

While it seems obvious that comics and graphic novels are suitable fodder for any classroom, including the art room, to boost literacy, there is some resistance by educators and critics to acknowledging comics as legitimate art or literature (Groensteen, 2000; Thompson, 2007). According to Thierry Groensteen (2000), comics have existed for over 150 years, and the resistance to legitimizing comics is historical and applied by educational policy makers in some arenas and the art world in others. Many well-known artists such as Trenton Doyle Hancock, William Kentridge, Elizabeth Murray, Arturo Herrera, Roy Lichtenstein, and Philip Guston crossed between the world of high art and popular culture through the creation of work that draws heavily on the influence of comics (Strickland, 2003).

Historically, comics were marginalized in the art world, but they are getting more critical attention in current and contemporary media. Why are comics positioned on the fringe? Roger Sabin (1996), a noted arts scholar from the UK, stated that historically, "They are perceived as intrinsically 'commercial,' mass produced for the lowest-common-denominator audience, and therefore

automatically outside the notions of artistic credibility" (p. 8). Thierry Groensteen, a comics scholar, states four reasons that comics were once "condemned to artistic insignificance:" (1) they are a hybrid form combining words and images; (2) the literary aspect of comics is seen as sub-par in terms of quality; (3) comics are perceived as closely connected to the "low" art of caricature; and (4) comics are associated with a regression to childhood pleasures (Groensteen, 2000, p. 34). Ironically, the past relegation to the world of low art is, at times, advantageous for comics. Roger Sabin (1996) wrote

The comic's exclusion from the art establishment enables it to eschew the dampening appraisal of art criticism. Moreover, its association with street culture gives it a certain edge, which many contemporary artists have vainly attempted to transfer to the gallery. Whereas fine art can only send shocks through the art world, comics—available to a far broader audience—are still regarded as dangerous enough to be clamped down on intermittently. (p. 236)

Most students had a very limited idea of what comics/graphic novels can look like. What helped to liberate students from their fear was encouragement from their peers and seeing a large number of examples.

The most notable clamp on comics was in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Bradford Wright (2001) presents a brilliant account of the controversy that surrounded comics during the 20th century. He explains that in 1950, Dr. Fredric Wertham, the author of *Seduction of the Innocents*, in an attempt to introduce legislation to censor comics, testified in front of the United States Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Crime in Interstate Commerce. Dr. Wertham believed whole-heartedly that comics contributed directly to juvenile delinquency (Wright, 2001). The comics industry reacted by self-regulating the industry and creating the now infamous Comics Code (Wright, 2001). Ironically, this regulation spawned the underground comix movement, which birthed some of the most notable comic creators in this century.

Many creators of contemporary comics and graphic novels feel that it is advantageous *not* to be recognized by the art world as legitimate artists practicing a legitimate art form. In 1993, Art Spiegelman, the well-known creator of *Maus I & II* said, "Comics fly below the critical radar" (Sabin, 1996, p. 9). Since Spiegelman's comment, comics and graphic novel readership dramatically increased. Comics and graphic novels are a genre in which creators explore serious themes and write amazing short stories (Allen, 2006). In 2004, in response to the question of whether comics had gained a new level of acceptance, Spiegelman said,

It's a done deal. There are museum shows that will include comics without blinking an eye. And bookstores all have their sections for comics or graphic novels or whatever they're calling them. Universities are teaching comics. It's now part of the culture without having to be something to apologize for. (in Fischer, 2004, p.5E)

Spiegelman is right. Currently, there are

three academic peer reviewed journals that deal with nothing but comics. There are also a number of universities that offer courses related to comics and graphic novels and well over one hundred dissertations written on the subject (<http://www.comicsresearch.org/ComicsDissertations.html>). In the US there are six art museums devoted entirely to comic book art and cartoons. In 2006, \$330 million dollars worth of graphic novels, comic books, and manga were sold in the US, up from \$245 million in 2005 (Reid, 2007).

Stephen Weiner (2003) a comics scholar and library director, believed that there are four reasons for their rise in popularity: (1) a number of recent movies were based on graphic novels; (2) publishing houses produced a large number of literary graphic novels; (3) novelists broke into the industry and used the medium to explore serious literary novels; and (4) journalists drew attention to the growing field.

Using Comics and Graphic Novels to Explore Empathy, History, and Story

As a teacher, I see firsthand how the use of comics and graphic novels can present occasions for students to explore multiple disciplines that inform their artmaking process. These texts also can aid students in exploring important social issues. Graphic novels, like a compelling work of art, or a well-crafted piece of writing, have the potential to generate a sense of empathy and human connectedness among students. For example, in *Maus I* by Art Spiegelman (1986), *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (2004), or *Palestine* by Joe Sacco (2002), it is impossible for readers not to feel some sense of empathy with the main characters and the conflicts they endure and witness. Readers watch characters wrestle with history and their personal and surprising reactions to events. Empathy is one of the most important topics generated by this type of material. Art allows viewers to step into the eyes of another and consider a different point of view. Candace Jesse Stout, a professor at Ohio State University, stated, "It is the aesthetic experience that makes possible 'privileged moments' through which students can live new experiences and move beyond the limitations of self" (Stout, 1999, p. 34).

Comics within a Learning Community

I use comics as part of my curriculum in both the university setting and in a secondary school setting. The learning objectives are different in each setting. Image, Text, Story: Exploring Comics and Graphic Novels is a course where students explore various genres within comics, deconstruct the production of comics using Scott McCloud's (2006) *Making Comics*, and produce their own graphic novella. The first two objectives, exploring and deconstructing comics, were enjoyable for students. But, when students were asked to create their own comic/graphic novel they were suddenly plagued by self-doubt. Some students were distressed over the idea of drawing, others about writing the story. Most students had a very limited idea of what comics/graphic novels can look like. What helped to liberate students from their fear was encouragement from their peers and seeing a large number of examples. In spite of this, self-doubt was difficult to overcome.

I had to work hard to erase students' stereotypes, even more so to erase their ideas about traditional comic drawing styles including

People tend to prioritize catastrophes, a parking ticket can edge out 140,000 drowned Bangladeshis, some horrors make us cry while others make us cheer, and, incidentally, we're not all swimming in the same blood.

Goodbye to all that

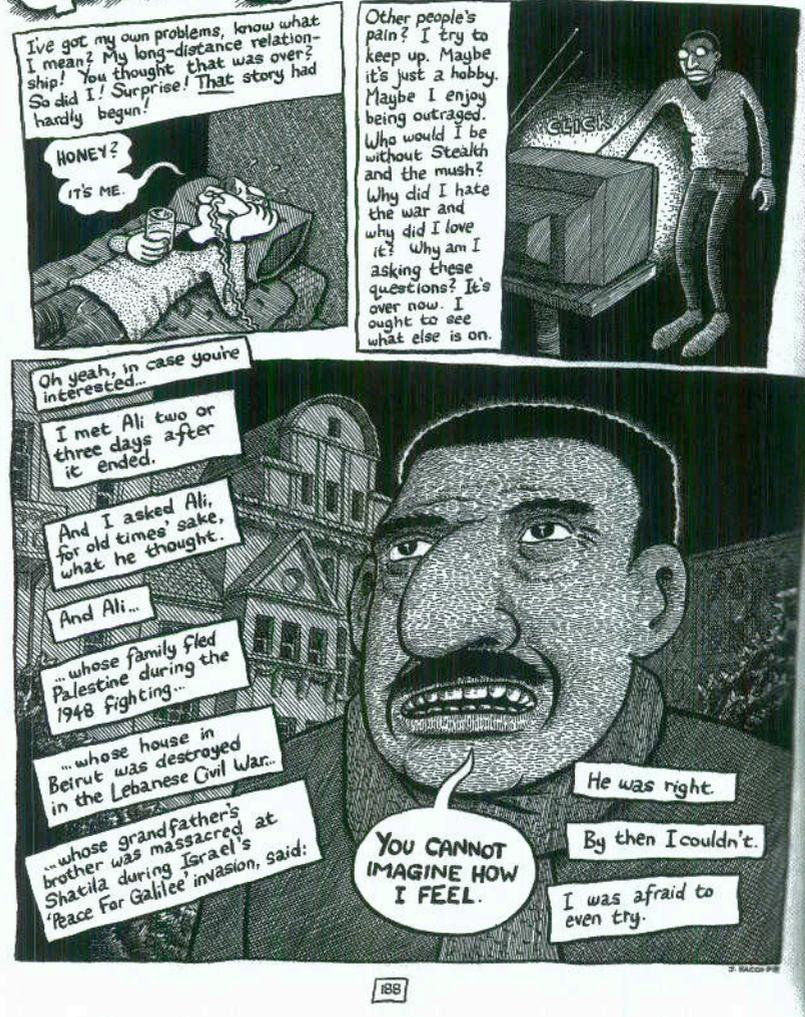


Figure 1. Joe Sacco, *How I Loved the War in Notes from a Defeatist*, 2003, Fantagraphics Books, Seattle, WA (page 188). Courtesy of Fantagraphics Comics.

realism, hyperanatomical depictions of muscular superheroes and heroines, and Manga/Anime-inspired illustrations. By showing them a wide variety of work by accomplished comics artists such as Joel Priddy, Ester Pearl Watson, Aileen Kominsky Crumb, Lynda Barry, Joe Sacco, Chris Ware, and John Porcellino, we hoped to help them ignore the demon on their shoulder shouting, "Is this good? Does this suck?" (Figure 1). We also introduced them to the computer program Comic Life by PLASQ.

Initially, many students had a great concept, but flagged when they had to move from a concept to a story arc. I gave students several exercises to help them enter their story in different ways, through the creation of a character, the creation of a space, through found stories from covert observation, to personal stories taken from experiences and journal writing. Another

approach involved patterning a story after a favorite text by following conventions of the genre to which the text belongs. Small working groups were useful to help students “workshop” their graphic novellas with trusted peers who were involved in the same endeavor.

In another course, I asked preservice art teachers to create a comic about a personal experience. These experienced artists found the assignment of creating a short comic strip difficult but rewarding. Students were motivated by the memoir-based texts from creators such as Lynda Barry, Joe Sacco, Chris Ware, Alison Bechdel, Harvey Pekar, Joel Priddy, and Aileen Kominsky Crumb (Figure 2). Many students were adept at drawing but struggled with the story. We spent a day telling stories; this helped students translate their stories to images. Next we converted the images into a storyboard, and finally a comic.

One student who was trained as a medical illustrator had never explored drawing as a medium for telling stories. She enjoyed the challenge and also found her story to be more humorous and easier to translate using images. Her story was about rescuing a calf that was stuck in the birth canal. She was called late one night because the men who were working with the cow knew she understood the principles involved in calving and was not squeamish, and that she had small hands. In the end she impressed the farmers and also saved a calf (Figure 3).

Another student participated in a collaborative workshop between the University of Iowa Art Education Department and area art teachers to create rod puppets and marionettes. Her rod puppet, a cow king she named Bullregon, became an animated superhero. During the semester, an ex-boyfriend harassed her continuously. In her comic, she created a narrative where Bullregon made her tormentor “disappear.” While her story was fantastic, it was based on events in her life. For this student, creating the comic was therapeutic, technically challenging, and empowering. Her rod puppet became a model for drawing, and a vehicle for her fantasies (Figure 4). Both of these preservice teachers rose to the challenge of creating a comic based on personal experience. They both planned to use this experience as a springboard for instruction in their future classrooms.

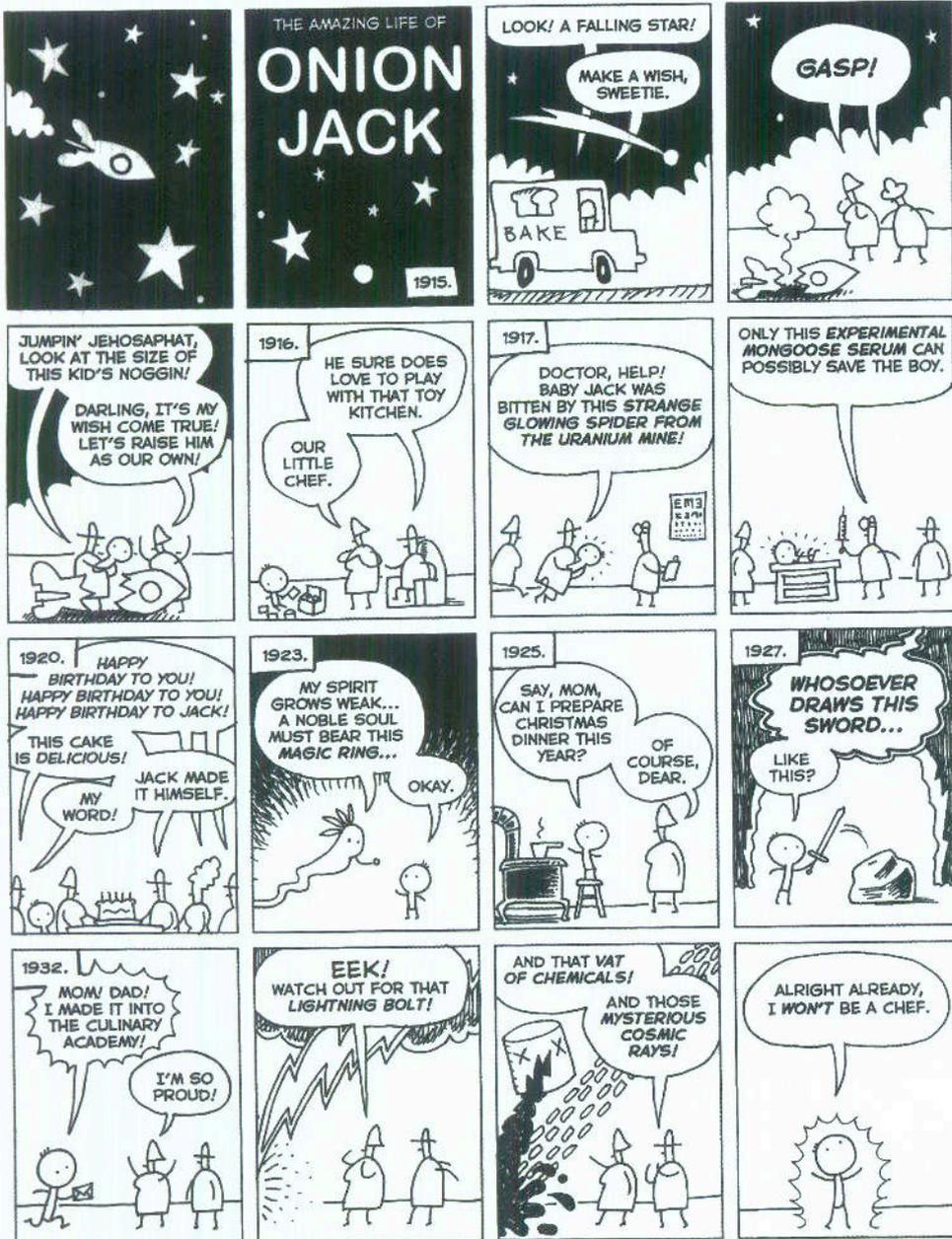


Figure 2. *Onion Jack*. Joel Priddy, 2006. Courtesy of the artist.

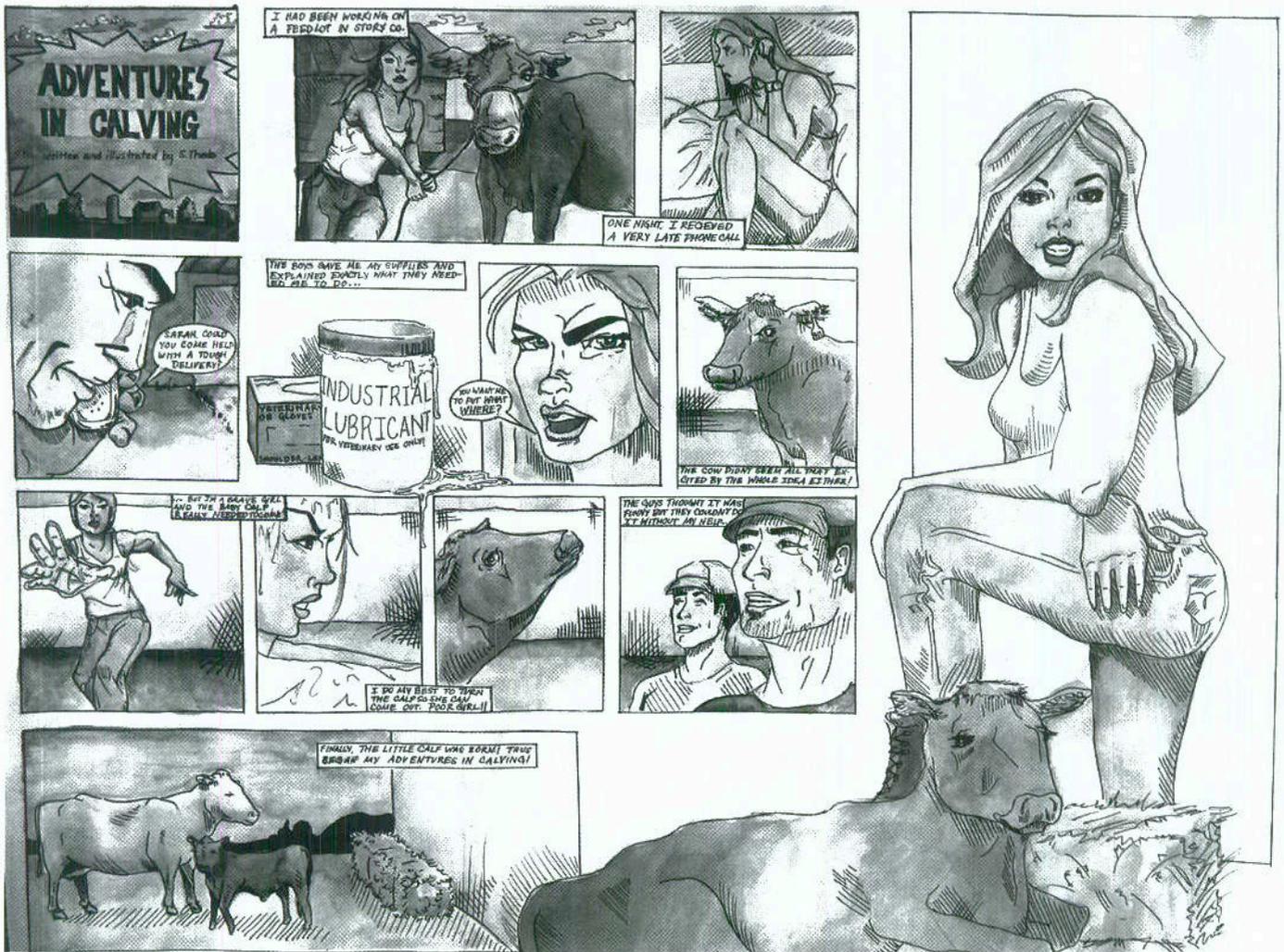


Figure 3. *Adventures in Calving*. Sara Thede, 2006. Courtesy of the artist. This comic, created by a preservice teacher, features a narrative about calving. The heroine is called in to rescue a calf who is stuck in the birth canal. This student used elements from the typical superhero genre to tell a personal and humorous story. Trained as a medical illustrator, Sara found that working in this way was challenging and pushed her highly honed naturalistic drawing skills in a new direction.

Graphic Novels and Human Rights

Graphic novels can also help teachers approach delicate subjects such as war, peace, or human rights. There are a number of creators who have written graphic novels that explore issues related to war, peace, and human rights, including Sue Coe, Joe Sacco, Eric Drooker, Seth Tobocman, Marjane Satrapi, Brian K. Vaughan, Pat Mills, and Joe Colquhoun.

In a secondary classroom, English teacher Jeremy Prouty and I collaborated to help students produce texts about human rights issues. Their final assignment tied together a powerful collaborative 12-week curriculum project about human rights. We asked students to produce a comics-based fictional

or non-fiction narrative to illustrate an article from the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

First, students chose a graphic novel to read with classmates in a series of reading circles. Next, students explored different styles of drawing and design within the texts they read. Then students chose an article from the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. They wrote a research paper on the article, thus gathering information for the creation of their comic strip. After this, students created thumbnail storyboards in preparation for their final work.

The final results successfully represented a wide range of images, styles, designs, and approaches. One student, who was initially uncomfortable drawing, produced a

powerful text that told a compelling story. His father operated a concrete company. His comic strip was based on article 23, which is related to the right to work, form unions, and work in human and favorable conditions without discrimination and for pay that is just, fair, and equitable (United Nations, 1948).

His strip depicted a worker in a concrete factory who was injured on the job and then fired. Concrete man came to the rescue and told him about article 23. In the end, the worker created a trade union and fought back. Even though this student struggled with drawing, his successful strip was meaningful and drew on his personal experience.

Making a Connection

It is important to create compassionate students who can comprehend the reasons that each person is essential to our world. I think those same reasons are even more urgent to comprehend in our current context of world peace, globalization, immigration, and integration (Duncum, 2001). Teachers can create an opportunity to inspire empathy, curiosity, and action. Empowering students to produce compelling texts creates an outlet for their need to participate, be heard, explore their own stories, and learn more about relevant social issues.

David Swanger (1993) made the case that art is essential to a moral education, which includes empathy. He stated, "One of the feelings that art engenders is empathy; successful art creates a connection between the percipient's sensibility, the sensibility of the artist, and if the art is representational, the figures within it" (p. 43). He goes on to use the example of *Maus II* (Spiegelman, 1986). He noted how our empathy telescopes when we read this particular graphic novel (Swanger, 1993, p. 44). There are a tremendous number of graphic novels, like *Maus*, that deal with narratives of oppression, conflict, and war, and which can inspire empathy, including *Persepolis I & II* (Satrapi,

2004), *Palestine* (Sacco, 1996), *Safe Area: Gorazde* (Sacco, 2000), *Portraits of Israelis & Palestinians* (Tobocman, 2003), *Nakedness and Power* (Tobocman, Turner, & Brownhill, 2003), *Charley's War* (Mills & Colquhoun, 2005), *Barefoot Gen* (Nakazawa, 2004), *Bloodsong* (Drooker, 2002), *Pride of Baghdad* (Vaughan & Henrichon, 2006), *Addicted to War: Why the US Can't Kick Militarism* (Andreas, 2004), *The 911 Report* (Jacobson & Colón, 2006), and *Macedonia* (Pekar, Robertson, & Piskor, 2007).

My experiences confirm that comics are a powerful way for students to envision the future, understand historical events, explore their own narratives, develop empathy, and learn about images, text, technology, and design.

Graphic novels and comics can be an innovative way to bring visual culture into the classroom. They can spark a wide range of interdisciplinary discussions and focus students on a variety of topics, ranging from war to fantasy to memory and childhood. Comics and graphic novels are tools to help teachers reach reluctant students and learn about youth culture outside of the classroom. Taking a final look at Wilson's third pedagogical site, where visual culture from outside of school connects with a genuine learning community within a classroom where inquiry can be initiated by any participant, I believe, like Wilson, that comics, manga, and graphic novels can create a bridge that is wide, stable, heavily trafficked, and easy to cross.

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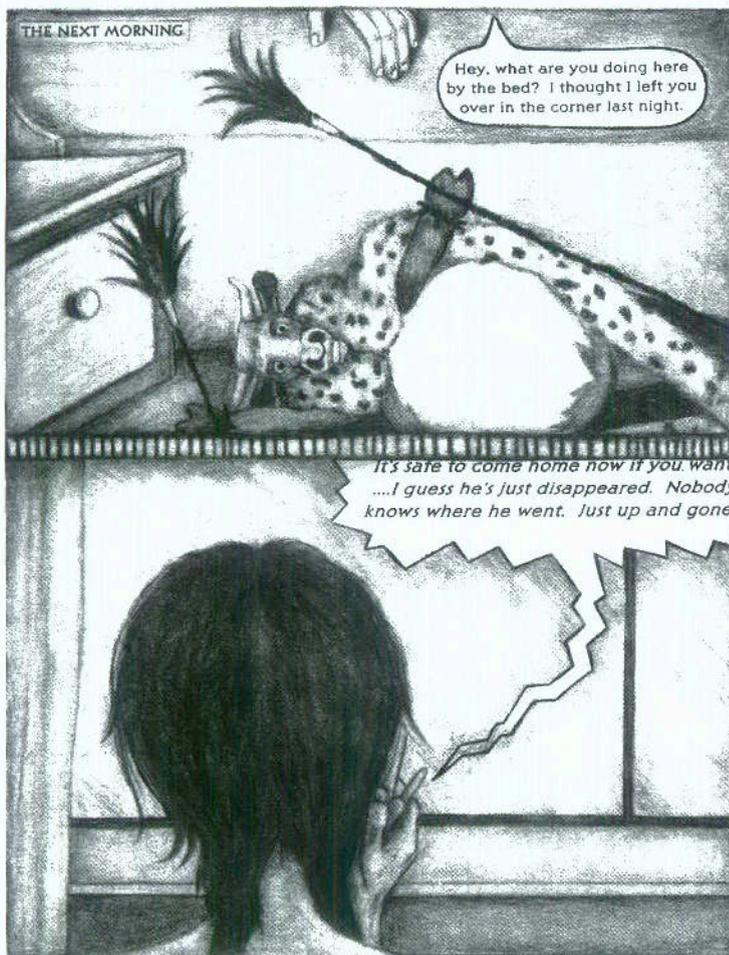


Figure 4. *Bullregon*. Hollie Reilly, 2006. This detailed comic, rendered in pencil, is based on a rod puppet created by the student earlier in the semester. She turned her rod puppet into a hero that makes her ex-boyfriend vanish. She used the comic assignment to explore a potentially dangerous situation she was facing. This talented and thoughtful student also found that the comic provided a natural connection between subjects and media to use with future students.

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