

# promising practices

BY MANFRED J. VON VULTE



PHOTO: COURTESY MANFRED J. VON VULTE

## Literacy Dons a Cape

*The Comic Book Project comes to Canada*

**Manfred J. von Vulte**, BA, MA, BEd (York University), has designed international museum education and taught in Germany in addition to his 13 years at Northmount School. He is also the published author of two books and numerous magazine articles.

**WHEN YOU HAVE** a student body that is high energy, very tactile and physical, with equally vigorous and energetic personalities, you'd better be prepared to keep up! As a Language Arts teacher at Northmount School, an independent, all-boys elementary school in North York, Ontario, I set my sites in early 2012 on enhancing the Language Arts program with something that would capture my students' imaginations – something with an inventive element.

Some of our boys are voracious readers, taking up to seven library books out at a time – but there are others who would not be reading independently were it not mandated by the Language Arts curriculum. My students are typically not interested in the nuances of relationships or ad nauseam descriptions as found in many of the novels touted to be excellent for junior and middle school

readers (*Tuck Everlasting*, *Little Women*); instead they revel in stories about action. Role-playing games, *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, *Warhammer*, and other stylized activities and books reign supreme.

Into this amalgam came the idea of a comic book club. Having been a collector since I was nine years old, I wondered if the same zeal and enjoyment for these books might still exist with today's children. Out of a population of 93 Grade 3 to Grade 8 students, a third joined the Comic Book Club. Clearly, I had struck a vein of potential gold!

In our Language Arts program, students learn the skills of inference, prediction, summarization, making connections, and character construction and motivation, which allow them to discover the world behind the book. Fascinatingly, I discovered that many of our comic book readers were already using this skill set.

As we, in the Comic Book Club, exchanged our various *Spiderman*, *X-Men*, *Superman*, and *Avengers* books, I observed that even some very reluctant readers remained absolutely silent and thoroughly focused. I asked a number of these students questions regarding plot, character, mood, theme, and complex vocabulary, while also employing terms like antagonist and protagonist. The responses exceeded my expectations. Recently, I interviewed Joe Kilmartin of the *Comic Book Lounge and Gallery*. When I shared my observations of my students, he commented: "With the world becoming very media/visually literate, someone who is learning English could use the comic book, engaging a sense of prediction and revision at the same time, by following sequential design, yet being able to flip back and restore the immediate visual hit again and again."

The students played out scenarios in their minds and with their peers, engaging the higher-capacity thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, prediction and evaluation. But there was still a missing piece in this tremendous literacy experience.

The design of a comic book was the natural end goal of this literacy initiative. Students had only been expanding on the written word and the worlds fashioned by other authors; it was time they struck out and constructed their own fantastic realms.

## EN BREF

Les enseignants cherchent constamment des programmes novateurs adaptés aux multiples niveaux de compétences et de différenciation que l'on trouve dans toutes les classes. Les arts du langage sont une discipline où l'éventail des habiletés des élèves est très large et comporte souvent des variables complexes. Les programmes *Comic Book Project* et *Comics Go Global* proposent une nouvelle avenue stimulante de développement et de progression pour les élèves moins intéressés par la lecture et l'écriture, tout en rehaussant l'expérience scolaire des lecteurs voraces et des auteurs prolifiques. Enveloppée par le pouvoir de l'imagination et fondue dans le creuset de la littérature des médias, cette initiative tire parti de l'artiste qui réside en chacun de nous et fonctionnera à merveille en classe pour tous les élèves.

Comic books had fueled their imaginations and provided a basis for writing to commence. Now I needed a program that would suit both reluctant and prolific writers. The popular Internet-based programs *Bit Strips* and *Go Animate* were good starting points. They structured the students' mindset in regards to how sequential thinking and writing looked in a more dynamic form than their comic books, but they lacked the much-needed organizational infrastructure that powers graphic novels and comics. I searched the Internet for a program that would fill this missing gap, and I found it in Dr. Michael Bitz's Comic Book Project/Comics Go Global initiative. Created in 2001 in partnership with Columbia University and Dark Horse Comics, the program, designed as a means to bring creativity back into children's lives, recently became its own entity within the Centre for Educational Pathways in New York City. It can be found all through the U.S., in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia, and now at Northmount School, its first school in Canada!

The Comic Book Project/Comics Go Global was truly that missing piece of best practice. Each student is given a character guide that narrows the creation process, and character creation is accomplished by the use of t-charts and other diagrams. Elements of graphic organizers are used to structure and storyboard the narrative, while

blocking out each of the scenes. Participants are guided by the efforts of the organizing teacher and through satellite conferences with Dr. Bitz and other global participants who edit, guide, and share their work. Students then receive a 12-page booklet, closely resembling a comic book but with a blank cover and rectangles of varying sizes on the inside pages. The students' stories unfold through these pages. The final edit of each student's creation will be published on the Comic Book Project's website. This publishing component, along with the global conferencing with other students, comprises the "Comics Go Global" side of the program.

This program was a masterful addition to the series we were already using, *Six Plus One Writing Traits* and *Spectrum Writing*. Essentially, participants learn sequential planning, thinking, and writing in a cloak of imagination and inspiration. The process of scaffolding writing ideas, using vocabulary lists (comic books have a high incidence of complex words), and graphic organizers found

***While the videoconferences were the crescendo of the week's work, the story talk and idea sharing amongst the participants were truly the idea factories in motion.***

within the aforementioned programs and in Comics Go Global proved to be invaluable. While Internet-based programs perhaps provided a spark of novelty, this program tapped into the three pillars of boys' enthusiasm for writing and reading: relevancy, duration, and exposure. Weekly conferences via Skype to New York and with our partner class in Indiana created a constant resurgence in passion for the project. Whenever technology can be incorporated into the writing process, it accelerates the desire of students to participate. Excitement reached a fever pitch when both Global Television and the Space Channel came to cover the Comic Book Project and our Skype sessions, and broadcast our project across Canada! Ultimately, the students' comic books will be published online for the whole world to see. Truly the three pillars of boys' enthusiasm were satisfied, as were many curricular tenets of media literacy.

In many respects, the Comic Book Project is a summative of sorts. It combines all of the strands, proficiencies and competencies of our Language Arts program, in a format that allows students to be the architects of their own worlds. What makes it truly unique is the thought and scaffolding behind the narrative of the comic book. While the videoconferences were the crescendo of the week's work, the story talk and idea sharing amongst the participants were truly the idea factories in motion. I witnessed collaborative efforts, peer-to-peer critique without negative emotion or reaction, and the genuine application of higher-order thinking skills – not in some teacher-led discussion and response sequence, but rather occurring in independent and unsupported student application and learning. There was also a lot of fun taking place – the smiles and sound effects said it all. Our boys really got into their stories and began proposing the typical "what-if" scenarios and humorous accounts. They enjoyed designing their first comic book cover, using exemplars from the comic book club and their own collections to guide their way. A great deal of time was spent on the covers, as they also established their

**Master of Educational Technology**

LEARNING INNOVATION ONLINE

You know where you're going.  
The online MET graduate program meets you there.

met.ubc.ca  
@UBCMET

a place of mind  
THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
Faculty of Education



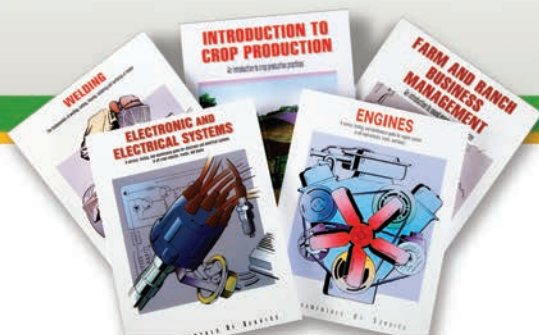
The members of the Comic Book Club at Northmount School in North York, Ontario, proudly present their creations (with teacher Manfred J. Von Vulte).

antagonists and protagonists there. Once through to the main body of the book, they stopped and worked on graphic organizers, so their stories would, as Mark D., in Grade 3, said, "Be really action packed and most of all, be understandable to the whole world!" After this, the panels, rich in text, imagery, and quality of vocabulary and story, began to be unveiled. It was an awesome sight when the prolific writer consulted with the reluctant reader on how to make his book shine, and truly spectacular when the voracious reader informed the reluctant writer that he had enjoyed his work. Yes, there is still very much a sense of wonder and magic in the pages of comic books – and now its readers have learned to cast their own spells. **EC**

*Northmount School will become the national hub for the Canadian project launch and Mr. Von Vulte will be its national representative. Beginning in September 2013, independent schools and school boards across Canada will be offered an opportunity to become involved in Comics Go Global and the Comic Book Project in Canada. Mr. Von Vulte will be conducting the Skype sessions from Toronto. For more information, contact him at: [manfred.vonvulte@northmount.com](mailto:manfred.vonvulte@northmount.com)*

## The last graduation cap they'll ever need.

Give your students the advantage by introducing the same learning series our John Deere technicians use in their first year on the job. John Deere Publishing offers five comprehensive series of educational curricula covering agribusiness management practices, agricultural machinery operation, and equipment maintenance. Written in simple language instruction with detailed and easy-to-follow illustrations, these books give students clear demonstrations for greater understanding and retention. Our textbooks will help students to think and analyze, enabling them to become better technicians or machine operators of large and small equipment. For more information visit us at [www.JohnDeere.com/publications](http://www.JohnDeere.com/publications).



Copyright of Education Canada is the property of Canadian Education Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.