

REDEFINING READING: COMICS IN THE CLASSROOM



The Return of the Saturday Matinee!

Recently we decided to do Saturday Matinees @ the IMC, a teacher's lending library for San Diego Unified School District staff. These one-hour classes for teachers focus on the resources available to them. With Comic-Con just around the corner, I decided to do "Comics in the Classroom."

Literature? Comics? Yes, comics. When was the last time you looked at a comic without reading? Don't you have to determine sequence of events, character, plot, and resolution? And don't forget that these panels have a beginning, middle, and end in as few as three squares. Using Follett Destiny as a search tool, I found a website, professorgarfield.org, that allows you to sort the panels into correct sequence, and then you have to answer questions about them. It is not as easy as you might think!

COMICS IN THE CURRICULUM

Teachers can use comic books and graphic novels (fiction and nonfiction) to teach curriculum and standards. Publishers see the interest that students have in graphic novels. Some companies have published graphic novels of the classics. These versions make it easier for second language learners or students reading below grade level to grasp the storyline, as well as give them some background for reading the original. Stone Arch books and Capstone Press have created graphic libraries of content related curriculum. Now students can read what they want and learn something while doing it. As with any literature, teachers and librarians will want to pre-read before using graphic material with students.

As you learn more about graphic novels, you will find that many strategies carry over from using traditional literature. Many publishers and authors also have lesson plans on their websites, so there is no need to recreate the wheel. First Second Books, for example, has free lesson plans on its website. Here are some strategies for using any graphic work with your students in the library or in the classroom.

- Use a document camera to "read" a graphic novel or picture book to your students. The pictures are as important as the text, so everyone needs to see both well.
- Instead of barcoding comic books in the library, have students sign for them on a clipboard—perhaps as a reward or over the weekend.
- Allow students who like to draw the opportunity to use their skills in their work from time to time.
- Graphic novels and comic books are expensive. Encourage your students to swap books with each other.
- Photocopy a page of comic panels. Cut them apart. Ask students to put them in order.

By Deborah B. Ford



When was the last time you looked at a comic without reading?

- Photocopy a page of comic panels. White out the text and ask students to either match the panels to the original text or create their own. Students can work separately or in pairs.
- As an alternate activity, give students the text and have them illustrate the panel.
- Mo Willems' series, *Elephant and Piggie*, can be used as Reader's Theater. Divide your students into pairs and let them read.
- Have a gaming activity. Whether it's Dance Dance Revolution or a video game challenge, this activity is sure to bring them into the library.
- Use graphic novels to teach transition words.
- Use graphic novels with ESL students to teach fluency. Turn a graphic novel into Reader's Theater just by reading the dialogue. Be sure to assign a narrator.

SEARCHING AND FINDING

Once I told the group what graphic novels are, and why and how to use them, the next logical step was finding them. Enter the IMC libraries and Destiny. Destiny is our one-stop digital shopping cart. Teachers choose their school, check the IMC box, and search. One Search finds hundreds of books, database articles, and websites on a topic. By typing in "comics" and our subject area, one can find content related materials and make a list to keep track of those resources. By making the list

public, students can see those websites, databases, and books or media. Matinee attendees learned that they can book these materials from IMC in advance and have them delivered. Membership has its privileges.

To make it easier to find supportive websites, I directed participants to my Internet hotlist of websites for books and boys. Searching through that list, you will find links to student and teacher resources, lesson plan ideas, and even software that students can use to create their own comics.

THE COMIC-CON EFFECT

Perhaps I hit on a popular subject with my Comic-Con gig. Word got to my school district. The media was alerted. The next day, my office was filled with reporters and news cameras. The district gathered all the footage into one video clip that runs about 3.5 minutes. *School Library Journal* called me for an interview. *Library Media Connection* asked me to write an article, "Redefining Reading." I was invited to speak at the SLJ Leadership Summit in Chicago. I have answered mail from all over the country about using graphic novels in the classroom. I stand amazed.

I was even more amazed at Comic-Con. For those of you who are out of the popular culture loop, the annual San Diego Comic-Con International is the place to be for popular culture, comic books, all things Star Trek, and the like. It's a place to see and be seen. This four-day conference was attended by 130,000 people in 2010. The convention center's main floor is completely covered with vendors while break-out sessions

start in the morning and end at "prevening." There are movie and TV premiers and costume balls. So many people wear costumes that you would think you are on the back lot of a movie production company.

Together with three university professors I spoke on a panel on "Comics in the Classroom." The room was set up for 260 people. I thought, "Hmm, going to be a lot of empty seats." Was I wrong! It was standing room only. Afterwards, our table was mobbed by people who wanted to ask questions, get our cards, and ask for help.

I walked the vendor floor on Preview Night. I have to say, it was much different than a library conference. I am afraid that even though I had on my cowgirl boots for bravery, I was still very anxious. I was delighted to see publishers I knew. Despite the crowds, the traffic, the unfamiliarity, a funny thing happened. I usually avoid downtown like the plague during the Con. Too many crowds, etc. But I have to say this: The folks who go to Comic-Con are passionate. They love the characters. They love the buzz. They love the comics. I, too, fell under the spell. I went there to preach redefining reading, but left as a fan of Comic-Con.

FROM COMIC-CON TO THE WORLD!

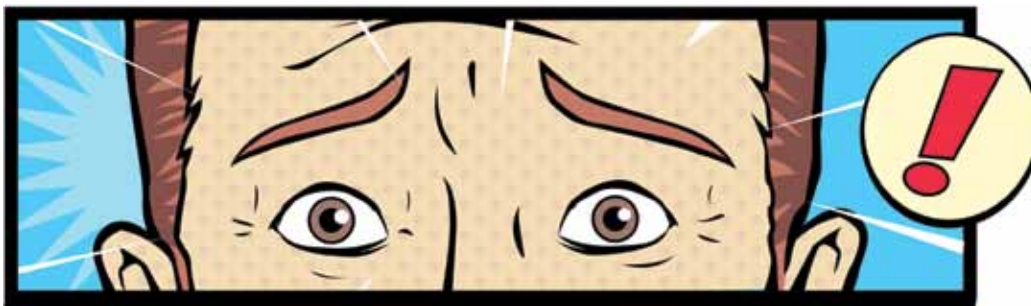
Another funny thing happened. I learned some valuable lessons. We have to tell people what we do. I've spoken in forty-five states and two countries, published a book, and made keynote speeches. Comic-Con is what caught the buzz for my district. From book fairs to speaking engagements, the world needs and wants to know many things. Toot your own horn. Take a chance and do something you wouldn't normally do. Speak at Comic-Con, for example. Or at your state conference. Or at your school board meeting. You can never tell where it might lead.

WEBSITES

Libraries Matter blog:
<http://deborahford.blogspot.com>

Books and Boys website:
<http://tinyurl.com/booksforboys>

Deborah B. Ford is an award-winning teacher librarian with more than twenty-five years of experience as a classroom teacher and librarian in K-12 schools. She is currently the district resource librarian for San Diego Unified School District, supervising over 180 school libraries. Her book *Scary, Gross and Enlightening: Books for Boys, Grades 3-12* was published by Linworth Publishing.



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