

WHY I TEACH COMICS IN

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A Personal Narrative about the Transformative

Why would a technology lab instructor—someone whose job description is to teach the tip-tap of the keyboard, PowerPoint design, Internet safety, and the like in an elementary school—specifically teach reading in his classroom and run an after-school literacy club using comics?

I teach reading—specifically comics literature—to my students because I used to hate reading. During my days of kid-dom, teenager-ism, and even young adulthood, I found reading a burdensome chore consisting of reading, re-reading, falling asleep reading, and reading while having no recollection of the three previous pages. The process was so frustrating.

I have always loved stories. In fact, throughout my entire existence I was consumed with stories of adventure, myth, monsters, and heroes. I spent many hours playacting stories in the yard with makeshift props, and reenacting stories with my toys. I dressed up, wore capes and cowboy hats, wielded light-sabers and battle axes, and carried shields made out of aluminum snow-saucers and magic pouches full of pretend amulets or elixirs. I embraced play-pretend

long after my friends grew out and away from such childish notions. I simply hid my props and toys and costumes under the bed and quietly played with that lone friend who got it. Now I proudly display my toys in my classroom, come what may.

In essence, I have always been interested in those devices that brought my fantasy mind-stories. It's just that I didn't read them. I played them. Acted them. Changed them in my head. In my adult life I wrote them. Words. I did interact with words, just not in the traditional book sense—until later. Disliking reading was not enough to keep me from earning a Bachelor's degree in English, which required a lot of reading and persevering through a lot of struggles, but I focused on writing. Librarians and teachers know good writers must be good readers, yet I resisted this reality until mature adulthood when I discovered the wisdom in the reading-writing advice I had received and discarded earlier.

My Transformation

Even the poorest of prediction skills should lead one to see what changed my reading mentality: comics. It was comics literature that changed my entire worldview of reading and

harmoniously merged the two parts of my heretofore dichotomy: my love of story and my consternation toward reading. I went from the rare instance of reading for fun (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Lord of the Rings*) to reading for my own personal enjoyment on a monthly, weekly, and even daily basis. Comics, you see, changed my life. Pardon the puffery, but the truth is comics really did rewire my brain and heart, and turned me into a reader. Not just a reader of comics but also a reader of, well, everything.

When I became a teacher as a late-in-life career change, I knew what comics had done for me, and I wrote my Master's thesis on the subject of comics in education, started [The Graphic Classroom <www.graphicclassroom.org>](http://www.graphicclassroom.org) and proclaimed in my elementary-school job interviews that I wanted to start a comic book club. My

WHY DO I TEACH COMICS IN SCHOOL? I CANNOT CONCEIVE OF A LEGITIMATE, RESEARCH-BASED REASON WHY I WOULD NOT.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

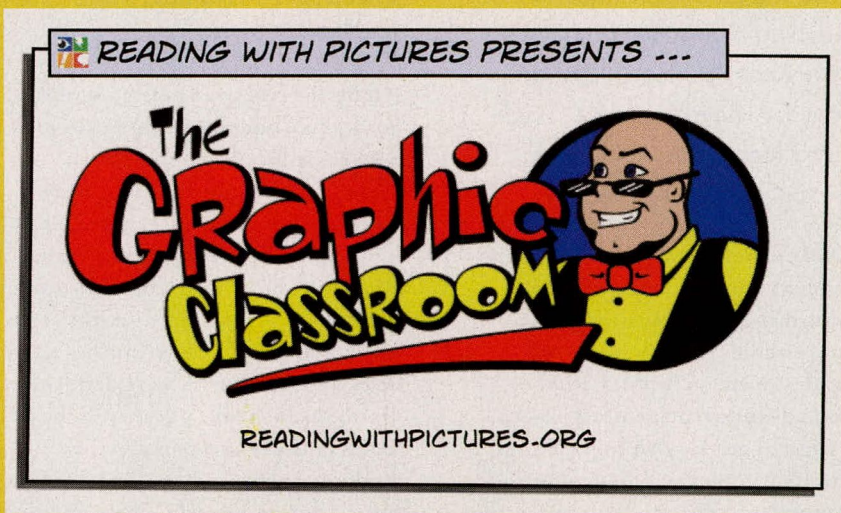
Effect of Comics Literature

personal monomyth¹ toward lifelong readership is but one such journey in a sea of mythic life changes for students of mine, and, it turns out, for many other adults as well. Comics scholarship has turned into a serious educational effort with significant research backing the use of graphic texts in K–12 and beyond.

My Ally

Of course, it was my school librarian who was the first supporter and cosponsor of the Hall of Heroes comic book club. She was one of the only teachers who did not discard my comics idea as foolish. Together, she and I made literary history in our school. Parents freely share stories of student transformation from reading-hater to bookworm who chooses reading over video games. During recess students ask to check out comics from my lab. Teachers send students to us when all other interventions are failing or having minimal effect. Kids wear superhero shirts when they come to the technology lab. Our district's board of education asked our club to speak at a board meeting this past year.

1 What's a monomyth? Go to <<http://library.thinkquest.org/05aug/00212/monomyth.html>> to learn more.



Most importantly, kids read because they want to read. On the playground, they talk about what they are reading and share it with us. They beg to check out comics before and after school, and ask to read when their work is finished in their grade-level classrooms.

Lifelong Readers

When I speak at conferences, I always remind the participants: "Not reading never leads to reading." Many kids—struggling readers, reluctant readers, proficient readers, advanced readers, below-basic readers, kids of all kinds—when they read comics, fall in love with reading. In time, that love branches out into

all types of literature and creates lifelong readership for enjoyment.

Why do I teach comics in school? I cannot conceive of a legitimate, research-based reason why I would not.



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