BAM! WHAP! KRACK! ELLs as Comic Book Creators
by Erika Clark

Researchers, teachers, and librarians are no longer questioning the legitimacy of using comics in the classroom. Many can thank high school ELA instructors for including graphic-novel authors on their course syllabi, such as Satrapi (2004), Spiegelman (1986), and Yang (2008). A current question is, “How can instructors modify comics lessons and activities for beginner-level or SIFE learners?” For students with limited prior knowledge and/or skills in reading and writing, it would be challenging to expect them to successfully read and comprehend a graphic text without the appropriate scaffold supports.

Thus, in recognition of this awareness, I provided comic activities and a sample modified ELA mini-lesson at the November 2013 NYS TESOL Annual Conference. I had implemented and observed these hands-on exercises and resources with mixed-level learners in high schools in Brooklyn, an international institution in the Bronx, a public primary school in Puerto Bolívar, Ecuador, and Tsinghua University in Beijing, China.

In addition to taking away possible comic book ideas that would support learners in creating comics, conference attendees developed a better understanding of how comics could work in an ESL/EFL setting. Also, I wanted attendees who were not ESL instructors to become aware of language objectives that are essential in comics-based ELA lessons.

1. **First Date** (Graphic novel lesson plan, 2013)
   Learners receive a comic strip with whiteout dialogue. Instructions are given a first look at the sequence of illustrations. The panels include two characters on a first date, which appears to have gone wrong. Learners write the dialogue in a language other than their L1. If the learner is bilingual, he or she should complete the exercise in a language that he or she does not often speak. Facilitators will select three participants to share their comic strips (i.e., beginner, intermediate, and advanced participant).
   Language Target(s): The purpose of this assimilation activity is to have instructors experience the language troubles that beginner and SIFE students encounter. Though comics naturally include visual components superimposed over auditory and narration components (Jacobs, 2007), without language instruction and objectives, beginners would have a difficult time completing this simple exercise.

2. **Panel Lottery** (Abel & Madden, 2006)
   Students receive an index card or Post-it® note; each index card represents a panel or scene. Students are limited to adding three characters into the panel or scene. Characters could be used many times in one panel. A class comic will be created using every index card. Each person must include all index cards from the group.
   One way to model this activity is to have the teacher think aloud his or her sequence of sample index cards. Another way is to model the exercise by monitoring a fishbowl observation. Select a couple of students to model how they would order their index cards to the group. Students on the outside of the circle observe the negotiating process; students could present their stories orally to the class.
A sample extension activity is to have students write the narration, dialogue, and onomatopoeias for the sequence of illustrations.

3. **Metaphor Comic**
   Students will receive a Blob Tree (Wilson, 2009). Each person will be encouraged to circle the Blob that represents his or her personality. With a think-pair-share, each person will tell his or her shoulder partner why he or she chose the blob that is circled.
   Facilitators will lead the class to brainstorm adjectives to describe their personality. During this step, facilitators will encourage students to refrain from informal language.
   Next, participants will brainstorm an object that symbolizes the previously brainstormed personality traits. High school students would more likely select objects that they enjoy using every day. Then they reason for their selection by determining how their personality represents the chosen object. For example, “I am a cell phone because I am very talkative.”

4. **Sock Monkey** (ELA Trimester 1 Retreat Workshop, 2013)
   Students surround the sock monkey and take snapshots from multiple angles and perspectives, brainstorming various ways of how the sock monkey was viewed. Afterward, the teacher will provide academic terms for the photography shots and angles taken. Students will self-check and make corrections to the brainstormed list of words.
   Then, students view various frame shots from a graphic novel (see list of texts below). In small groups, learners should arrange frames in sequential order. Facilitators present actual stories to students so they can compare and contrast their choices to the actual story line.
   The purpose of this lesson is to motivate learners to work with the medium, while teaching components of a comic (i.e., framing, focus, gutters, lettering, paneling, dialogue, images). In addition, students become aware of framing and various focal points that cartoonists execute in the artwork of graphic novels and comic strips.
   Overall, the guiding question states, “How does the angle and focus of the frame influence how you tell the story?”

   **Language Target(s):** “I can use vocabulary to explain my snapshot perspective (e.g., bird’s-eye, close-up, landscape, side shot, portrait).”
   **Content Target(s):** “I can identify various perspectives through images. I can apply concepts of framing to organize panels of a comic strip.”

**Sock Monkey Texts and Websites**
- Bird Brain by Bird [http://birdbraincomix.blogspot.com/](http://birdbraincomix.blogspot.com/)
- Stitches by Davis Small [http://stitches.davissmallbooks.com/](http://stitches.davissmallbooks.com/)

**References**


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