

The Funnies Aren't Just Funny....: Using Cartoons and Comics to Teach

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- List people whose last names are compound words (example: Sally Greenpark).
- *Forum on Issues.* Have each student select a local issue, such as pollution, nuclear wastes, or crime control, and read up on the issue selected. Schedule an "Issues Forum" at which all the students who have chosen a particular topic will take part in a round-table discussion on that issue.

Help the students gather resource material on their issues from newspapers and magazines or by contracting local citizens' groups for pertinent information.

- *Who's Who?* Have each student write his/her full name and address on a large loose-leaf notebook page. List hobbies, personal information, and the types of books he or she enjoys reading. Put the pages in the notebook, in alphabetic order.

Students in the class can use the book for reference in sending holiday greetings or get-well letters. Encourage the students to list the titles of a few books they think the recipient would enjoy, based on the biographical data supplied.

- *Important Notice Board.* Put up an Important Notice Board in your room. It will capture the alienated reader's attention. This board can

contain notices of assemblies, field trips, and other important events. Keep the information concise: Where, When, Who, What. It can also be used by the students to notify their classmates that at a specified time they will be reading a limerick, rhyme, or poem, or that they will be giving a brief report on a "fantastic" book just read.

- *Patent Pending!* Following a study of inventors, each student imagines himself or herself a famous inventor and develops an original idea for an invention that is both practical and useful to modern society. Have the student prepare a drawing of this invention to present to the class.

Have the class vote on whether the inventor should receive a patent.

### Conclusion

Secondary teachers often become discouraged in their attempts to spark student interest in reading. As this article suggests, however, teachers can do a great deal to retrieve that alienated reader. Launching the type of activities described briefly in this article will get students to read willingly and derive all the enjoyment and satisfaction that comes from reading.

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# *The Funnies Aren't Just Funny....*

## *Using Cartoons and Comics to Teach*

JUNE ROSE RICHIE

**D**r. Edward DeRoche, nationally known Newspaper in Education consultant from Marquette University, stated in a recent address that there are too many two-by-four teachers, too

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*Dr. Richie, Assistant Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Memphis State University, has worked for the past six years with newspapers in the classroom as educational aids and has directed workshops and provided pre-service and in-service education in this area.*

many who limit their teaching and the learning experiences of their students to the two covers of the textbook and the four walls of the classroom.<sup>1</sup> The newspaper is the resource and the tool that can broaden student experiences in learning and bring reality into the classroom. The newspaper is fresh and different every day and can indeed be labeled "a living textbook." One of the strongest points of rationale for using the newspaper is that it provides relevancy and it updates teaching. We know that most textbooks are outdated before they reach the classroom. There are many other

plusses for using the newspaper. It helps the teacher individualize; contrary to what the teacher might have heard, the newspaper is written on a variety of reading levels. There will be some part of the newspaper that even the slowest and most reluctant readers will be able to master. The use of the newspaper lends itself to a variety of instructional modes. The newspaper is an economical curriculum material; most publishers sell their newspapers to schools for one-half the regular price, and a few give them to schools.

Using the newspaper allows a teacher to develop creativity, and a creative teacher fosters creativity in his/her students. Since the newspaper has an adult image, slow readers who may be able to work with comics only will not be ashamed to walk around with a newspaper under their arms as they might be a remedial reading text. The newspaper contains practical information about everyday working and living which is often not presented in textbooks. Reading and studying the newspaper

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**“Comics can teach one in a lighthearted way how to deal successfully with the real world.”**

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under the guidance of a skilled teacher expands students' areas of interest, it expands their store of knowledge, and it opens up the world to them. Since most adults get much of their “post school” education from newspapers, it is important to teach students how to read a newspaper discriminately and to recognize the role of newspapers in society.

A resourceful teacher will utilize every part of a newspaper in his/her teaching—even the obituaries—but among the most versatile parts of the newspaper are the comics and cartoons. Most students are introduced to the newspaper on their parents' laps through the “funnies,” so there is a built-in motivation to learn through the comics. The comics are informal and consumable. They can be cut apart, drawn on, and colored with no fear of reprimand. This is certainly not true of textbooks. Comics are interesting; young people do not consider comics dull, because they are pictorial, colorful, and humorous. When comics are utilized in the classroom, students do not feel that the comics are being forced on them as they sometimes feel about a reading series. Comics show the world and life in a novel way by taking the serious and animating it. This may well be why children choose to read them. Comics can teach one in a lighthearted way

how to deal successfully with the real world. For example, values clarification is often a major consideration in comics, especially in “Doonesbury” and “B.C.” Cartoonist Morris Turner, creator of “Wee Pals,” a cartoon strip which appears in *The San Diego Union*, and a film entitled “Kid Power” has dedicated his talent to enlighten young people on such topics as human rights, equal employment opportunity, and the role the basics play in any vocation. Comics are informative. From them the student can learn new vocabulary, the difference between antonyms and synonyms, configuration, sequence, sentence structure, different dialects, and punctuation.<sup>2</sup>

Before students begin working seriously with cartoons and comics, they need to learn more about the material they will be utilizing. Teachers can give valuable orientation through exercises which force the student to examine and analyze this new resource. Using the comics sections, students might supply true-false answers to such statements as the following:

- comics strip characters never seem to grow old;
- comic strips always use easy words;
- comic strips are only meant to make you laugh;
- all comic strips tell a continued story;
- comic strip people's words are always in a balloon;
- the comic strip story is told using only pictures and the characters' words;
- a comic strip always has four picture panels;
- all picture panels are the same width;
- comic strips show closeup and faraway shots;
- politics are not mentioned in comic strips.

Further analysis could be undertaken by asking students to find two examples of each of the following kinds of comics and supply the names and cartoonists for the strips:

- comics that are similar to human actions (realistic);
- comics that show a human weakness;
- comics aimed at boys and girls;
- comics aimed at adults;
- comics that may be helpful to society;
- comics that teach a lesson.

In addition to giving students background knowledge which would allow them to use the comics more effectively, these questions will stimulate interesting discussion.

With the advanced knowledge in learning psychology that we not have access to, educators realize that students are different and learn in different ways and at different rates. Much has been written about individualizing instruction and many efforts have been made to individualize. Despite efforts to individualize on a curriculum-wide basis through such techniques as modular scheduling, elective courses, and ability grouping, the most effective individualization takes place within the classroom. Comics and cartoons can be used to individualize instruction in a number of ways. Many teachers develop Learning Activity Packages (LAP's) to be used by individual students as remedial work or for enrichment. Two groups of teachers developed LAP's employing Wonderwoman and Snoopy themes to provide orientation to the newspaper. Another group of teachers developed a LAP to teach writing skills and used various cartoons and cartoon characters to make them interesting and colorful. Another LAP to teach the difference between fact and opinion utilized cartoon/comics to a great extent. When developing a LAP, one should be careful to state the objectives in terms that the student can understand, supply a variety of learning activities, and include measures by which the student can evaluate himself—by pre-testing, post-testing, and activity checks.

Perhaps more frequently developed than LAP's are folders to be used by individual students. These folders, which usually deal with a single skill or concept, are relatively inexpensive and easy to develop. The comics are a natural in developing folders. Most any language skill can be taught by utilizing the comics. Using one large "Family Circus" comic, one teacher asked the student to list ten adjectives and ten nouns. Another teacher, using the same comic, listed fifteen words and asked the student to supply a rhyming word for each. Still another teacher utilized this comic by listing fifteen words, first and last letters only, and asked the student to fill in the blank to learn to spell the words. Another teacher developed a folder by listing six words from a "Winky Ryatt" comic strip and asking the student to supply a synonym; and another teacher, using a "Peanuts" comic strip, listed twelve words and asked the student to supply a homonym for each. Using a "Shoe" strip, one teacher dealt with spelling, synonyms, and newspaper terms in a folder. Using "Dennis the Menace," one teacher asked the student to list four contractions used and to write the words for which each contraction had been substituted. One "Nancy" comic strip contained 18 misspelled words and was a natural for teaching spelling skills. Some students, even those on the

secondary level, have difficulty with sequence. One teacher developed a folder in which the frames of a "Ziggy" strip had been cut apart and scrambled. The student was to indicate the correct order of the frames by numbering them. Another folder was developed by asking the student to find in a "Shoe" strip examples of the four kinds of sentences and then to generate a sentence based on the strip. Suffixes and prefixes can be taught through the comics. One teacher used a "Peanuts" strip to ask the students to list three words that ended in "ing" and to make three new words by adding "ing" to root words in the strip. In most instances, the answers should be somewhere in the folder—on the back, under a flap, or in a pocket—so the student may check himself. Both LAP's and folders should be laminated to preserve them and to allow for repeated use by students.

The use of comics/cartoons lends itself to the development of new teaching strategies. The cartoons/comics supply much good material for role playing, unrehearsed dramatization which often deals with a social or psychological problem. In role playing, there is no rehearsing, no memorizing of lines, no coaching; its value as a teaching device lies in its spontaneity and the individual's creative use of his own experience. An editorial cartoon which deals with some social or political problem might be interpreted by students through role playing. Such comic strips as "The Family Circus," "Dennis the Menace," and "Winky Ryatt," which deal with family situations, lend themselves readily to role playing. Role playing comics/cartoons may serve as a springboard to the study of some selection in the anthology or may lead in the study of a thematic unit.

The use of comics/cartoons lends itself well to small group work, where students have an opportunity to exchange ideas, pool their resources, and develop cooperative work habits. Working with a section of comics, one group might take a "Ziggy" strip which has no dialogue and write dialogue for it. In this exercise, they would be developing their skills of interpretation as well as writing and punctuation skills. Another group might take a strip such as "Winky Ryatt," which often depicts teenage situations, and develop a skit based on the situation presented. Another group might take a strip such as "Doonesbury" and discuss the use of satire by cartoonist Trudeau. Another group using a "Blondie" strip, which often presents some marital problem, might exercise their creative writing skills by writing a sequel or a conclusion to a particular strip. Another group, using strips such as "Rex Morgan" or "Judge Parker" which often present social problems, might be stimulated to conduct

research and present a report on some social or political problem. Further analysis of the comics can be made by asking small groups of students to find comics which illustrate the following:

- economic opportunity, i.e., opportunity for individuals to improve themselves by their own effort;
- wide participation in politics;
- belief in reform rather than revolution;
- a mobile population;
- high position and freedom for women;
- toleration of differences, i.e., freedom of worship, speech, assembly;
- world-wide responsibility;
- respect for the rights and abilities of the individual.

Games and puzzles which facilitate learning in a fun fashion can be developed easily with comics/cartoons. One teacher developed a game board to teach vowel sounds. Directions were given by comics characters' dialogue in balloons. Since this game is usually played by two to four students, they can check each other. This same teacher developed a second game board featuring directions given by comics characters to further refine skills in using short and long vowels. One teacher developed a board which can be adapted to teaching any skill by writing different directions in the laminated balloons. A grid puzzle which contained the names of nineteen comic strip characters going horizontally, vertically, or diagonally was developed by one teacher. Another teacher developed a crossword puzzle containing thirteen names or terms relating to comic strips. These puzzles presented opportunities for students to sharpen their spelling, vocabulary, and locational skills.

The comics and cartoons can be utilized to teach values clarification. One of the most effective activities is to ask each student to design from a piece of poster board his/her own coat-of-arms, decorating it any way he/she chooses. The student divides the coat-of-arms into six sections and illustrates the statement in each section with a picture or word from the comics. The six statements are as follows:

- (1) One thing that I am very good at and one thing that I want to be better at;
- (2) My most important material possession;
- (3) What I would do with my life if I had only one year to do whatever I wanted and would be guaranteed success;

(4) One thing I believe in and would never change my mind about;

(5) My greatest achievement of the past year and my greatest failure of the past year;

(6) Three things people would say about me if my life ended today.

This activity allows for deep introspection on the part of the student and gives the teacher insight into what "makes the student tick." Students are usually eager to explain their selections to the class and to have their work displayed in the classroom.

Career education can be taught through utilizing cartoons/comics. Teachers and students can collect cartoons and comics which reflect attitudes about work and careers. These can be used to stimulate discussions on careers and the work ethic. The teacher can ask the students to search a comics section to see how many jobs or occupations are represented in the comics. This might arouse curiosity about qualifications, duties, and remuneration for certain jobs.

Critical thinking can be taught through the skillful use of an editorial cartoon and a corresponding editorial. The point should be made that the featured editorial cartoon does not always correspond to or relate to the editorial of the day but often does. The study might begin by discussing the symbols used in the editorial cartoon. Symbolism is often a hard concept for students to grasp. From the cartoon, the discussion might move to the editorial. The teacher could lead the class in a discussion of the purpose of the editorial and help students distinguish between statements of fact and statements of opinion found in the editorial.

There is no limit to the number of concepts and skills in reading, writing, thinking, and literary terminology that an imaginative teacher can present through comics and cartoons. The important thing is that teachers are developing their creativity and students are lifted out of the deadly doldrums of drill and are having fun while they learn.

#### NOTES

1. Edward F. DeRoche, Speech Presented at the Newspaper in the Classroom Workshop, Memphis State University, Memphis, Tennessee, August 7, 1978.

2. Copley Newspapers Educational Services *NIE Teacher's Exchange*, 1:2 (February 1978), p. 1.