

Writing Comic Strips in Class

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ABSTRACT

Teaching writing to students using comic strips is easier than more formal writing because students already know comic book writing conventions since most of them are frequent readers. Using homemade superheroes, students work in pairs to tell a story in a nine square strip. They take pride and enjoy their creativity, sharing the end result with their classmates. It is less work for the teacher than essays or paragraphs and the students enjoy writing in English for a change.

Keywords: Comics, writing, superheroes

I. Why Use Comic Strips

Who does not like comics? Probably most teachers when their students are reading them instead of concentrating on their school work. We find them everywhere – under desks on laps, inside books they are pretending to read. At least they are reading something, I suppose. Where do they come from? Comic book rental places, though some do buy them. And they are all over the Internet, too. Webtoons are very big these days. Comics are part of popular culture, particularly for children and teenagers. So “comics are of high interest to many students, thus increasing the motivation to engage in literacy” (cited by Ranker, p 296). Students are very aware of popular culture. In fact, “popular culture is integral to their lives of most middle school students. Use of popular culture can, therefore, diminish the disparity children perceive between their lives in and out of school by legitimizing many of the after school pursuits” (cited by Morrison, Bryan and Chilcoat). I think this applies to students as young as grade five in Korea. And I have seen comic books used in the classroom. Ministries of education make comic books to teach history and use cartoon illustrations in other material as well. One was a comic book explaining Admiral Yi’s life story. Why was a history book written as a comic book? It is obvious – kids will read anything written as a comic book. So why not use comic books to teach writing?

Writing English in elementary school is a daunting proposition. How can students write paragraphs, essays or stories when they can barely write a sentence? The students are overwhelmed and the teachers are frustrated. Many teachers would love to have an opportunity to do some creative writing but it seems too difficult also. Some teachers make small poems with a few words but how about doing some writing they may like, they know about and you and they may enjoy? Write some comics?

II. How to Write Comics

Please understand I am not talking about entire comic books or just a few panels. Eight or nine panels would be just about perfect. That is just long enough to tell a short story. And it is easier on you, because you have less teaching to do. Imagine trying to teach students to write a paragraph. My university students have difficulty with all the rules of main idea sentences, supporting sentences and the

concluding sentences, let alone complex grammar. All students know storytelling techniques. Most students are very well acquainted with the conventions of comics. Basically the written part has a narration or explanation of the history or events or actions. Balloons are used for speech or thoughts. They can complete an entire story in a limited number of panels. I recommend about nine. There is less to teach using comics and a lot less frustration for students and teachers.

Students seldom get a chance to do much creative writing. This is a good opportunity without being overwhelming. It does not require a lot of time and consideration of what to write. When you write comic strips, the writing is limited to a little narration and some speech by the characters. It is still writing but much more manageable and because the students like comics, they are more apt to be a little more careful than usual. And they illustrate their work. I have often witnessed students drawing characters all the time so I know they enjoy it. Often they copy characters or styles, so it would not require much effort to alter them a little to make new characters.

Most students are very familiar with superheroes. Even the students who do not read comic books – I have only met one – they have all seen superheroes on TV or in movies. When you use superheroes it becomes a basic story of good vs evil. I never allow them to use established heroes. They need to make up their own superheroes with a unique superpower. This can be a little shocking sometimes as I find they are quite creative and not shy about the heroes using bodily functions for superpowers. One girl wrote a story about saving me and my dog from a threatening Jindo dog through the odor of the expulsion of air from her torso. From Volleyballman, a coal eating miner who rescues other trapped miners and a super dancer club girl, I have had a great number of creative superheroes illustrated by my students. We start class discussing who their favorite superheroes are, what their superpowers are and who usually wins. I show them one that I made. Then I put them into pairs. I find having a partner makes this project less overwhelming. They must collaborate and if one of them is not a strong illustrator, then the other can do it. I give them a page with nine boxes. The bottom of each box has a little strip for narration or comments.

Most of them can do it in an hour, writing the story and drawing. I do not require them to make beautiful, perfect illustrations, but they usually look pretty good. I often get asked to correct sentences more because they do not want corrections written over their illustrations. I try to do them in pencil and save the illustrations from damage. But this has a lot to do with pride, too. I seldom get to the part where I tell them to let other people read their strips. They are busy sharing their work. Morrison, Bryan and Chilcoat say that “Culminating activities give students opportunities to demonstrate their learning and to share their creative work with others.” (p765). Writing the comics gave them a sense of ownership and pride in their work. They had fun creating it, reading each other’s work and were happy to see their classmates enjoy their creativity and there was a little showing off.

III. Conclusion

I have had students make comic strips in my first year writing class in one hour in class. They were much more careful about their writing and they were very motivated because they enjoyed it so much. It did not require so much work as a paragraph for either them or me. I have never had two sets of students come up with the same idea. My gifted children (grade six) were not any different than my university students. In regards to pride, sometimes when you do a creative project like this, at the end the students

throw it away in the garbage can beside the door when they leave. I have never found any in there yet. But then again maybe they are waiting until they get farther away, but I doubt it. I usually photocopy them so each student could have a copy and they always tucked them in their books or bags before they left. If I had my own classroom I would hang them on the wall for everyone to see. In fact, I have two framed on the wall beside my desk – the one about the girl who saves me and my dog, and the one about my dog being beaten by a dog bully who becomes a superhero to stop the bullying. I have pride in their work and I enjoyed their creativity as much as they did through comic book writing.

REFERENCES

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About the Presenter

Ingrid Zwaal works for Jeonju National University of Education and has lived in Korea for eighteen years. She has taught students of all ages. She graduated from the University of Toronto with a BA in English and Drama and an MSED in English secondary education from Canisius College in the US. She has a weekly column in the SaeJeonbuk Newspaper and helps at the Jeonju Volunteer Centre. She plays volleyball with her university students and enjoys making hanji, photography and reading. Email: scottietoy@gmail.com