

Teachers College Columbia University

A&H: 4199

Understanding, Making, and Teaching Comics: Practice, Process, and Pedagogy

Instructor: Nick Sousanis

Fall, 2011 (2-3 Credits)

Monday 5:10-6:50pm

As Alice said: “*What is the use of a book ... without pictures or conversations?*”

Course description

Long derided as juvenile at best, comic books have in recent years been shedding their negative image and gaining greater acceptance in the educational community, particularly as a means of aiding in literacy efforts. But for many teachers eager to embrace comic books in their classrooms, the realm of comic books and graphic novels remains foreign territory. Comics are an interdisciplinary, multi-modal medium, a language of juxtapositions and an art of fragments defined by Scott McCloud (1993) in his seminal work *Understanding Comics* – a comic on comics – as: “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (p. 9). In comics’ inherent ability to integrate multiple perspectives and weave together the visual and the verbal, they offer a rich medium for expression. While they do indeed provide a useful bridge for verbal literacy, comics are a compelling and important medium for study in their own right.

Participants in this course will gain a thorough understanding and better appreciation of comics through an in depth investigation of the various genres and creators within the medium. Together, we will explore the inner workings that make comics tick, learn how to make them (and we will make them!), and develop ways in which to confidently incorporate comics into the classroom setting. As the wealth and range of comic books/graphic novels produced in the last 100 years or so is tremendously vast, each member of the class will be encouraged to explore particular works and genres as per their interests and share their findings thereby expanding the scope and diversity of all of our understandings. Furthermore, this course will draw on the instructor’s own dissertation work – academic research produced entirely in comic book form. This will open conversations regarding the importance of visual literacy, how we might reconsider the long held bias in favor of verbal thinking at the expense of other means, and what this has meant for educational practice. Uniquely situated in the gulf between the visual and the verbal, comics offer an important synthesis whose potential is only beginning to be tapped.

By embarking on a journey of study and practice, making and application, course participants will expand their appreciation for comics and their understanding of the possibilities within this medium and its various genres. Ultimately, this will lead to the development of ways to enrich our classrooms and our students.

A few key texts that will be visited along the way: McCloud *Understanding Comics*, Madden & Abel *Drawing Words & Writing Pictures*, James Bucky Carter *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels*, Art Spiegelman *Maus*, Josh Neufeld *After the Deluge*, Craig Thompson *Blankets*, Alan Moore/Dave Gibbons *Watchmen*, along with instructor-supplied excerpts from academic research texts that will further our investigation of comics, verbal/visual thinking, multi-modality, and education. Additionally, participants will be responsible for bringing in their own readings or picking works out of the instructor-provided list (detailed below) to delve into and share with the class. Assignments will include making works in comic book format – using simple software, collage, and pencil and paper. We will create within the medium to further our study of it from the inside – and to have fun in the process!

Objectives in brief

In this class, we will:

1. Explore the origins of comic books and graphic novels (and understand this distinction), their evolution and growth into various genres and styles, and their standing in culture;
2. Examine the structure of the comics page, the dynamic relationship between image/image and text/image that creates a unique reading/viewing experience, and what makes comics stand as their own unique medium;
3. Undergo our own explorations in making comics by engaging in serious play;
4. Reconsider notions of literacy – through lenses of multimodality and visual thinking;
5. Consider how we might incorporate comics in the classroom and develop approaches and lessons to take back to one's own classroom practice.

An overview of the course's structure and topics to be covered

The following lays out a general trajectory for the course, through a sequence of essential topics or rather a list of encounters that we'll have together throughout the term. Given that participants all come with a different set of experiences with the subject matter, the actual sequence of events will unfold in feedback with class members' particular interests, allowing for the space to follow where excitement for discovery leads. Participant presentations throughout the term will serve to grow our understanding of what's out there in the medium, what's being done in the classroom – a way of seeing through “many eyes” as we hear from “many voices” to help shape our course. Note that core threads once begun will continue to be woven throughout the course even as new elements are discussed. We will not employ a “hit and run” approach to material, but rather one of constantly folding ideas together as we further our understanding.

- **Class One: Origin Story: A short history of comics**
 - Introductions, explore participants' background/experience with comics, and begin to set out our individual and overall aims for the course.
 - Establishing overview of comics (and comics-like things) through history, roots of the historic bias against them, and significant works that have led to that changing.
 - Jewish origin of comics – superhero as assimilation metaphor.
 - Why superheroes and comics were such a natural fit – as both emerge together.
 - Briefly touch on McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, as we begin to formulate a definition of what comics are. This will be picked up in greater depth in weeks to follow and over the entire term.
 - Key Readings: McCloud *Understanding Comics*, Will Eisner's biographical works, Art Spiegelman *Maus*, Frank Miller *The Dark Knight*, Alan Moore *Watchmen*,
- **Class Two: Strange new worlds, what's out there?: a look at various genres, titles**
 - Special guest (or field trip): Comics Librarian at Columbia University Karen Green – introduce the collection and resources available on comics.
 - More on comics in history and all the various genres they've taken over the years. By painting a landscape of the field, offer participants a map of where they may want to set up camp for the semester.
 - Touch on superheroes, manga, personal narrative works, and more
- **Class Three: Fragments and Juxtapositions: Contextualizing Comics**

- Read through McCloud's *Understanding Comics* alongside instructor-suggested and participant-selected works. Begin examining characteristics of how comics work through specific examples.
- Exploration of how time *is* space in comics.
- Key Readings: McCloud *Understanding Comics*, Moore/Gibbons *Watchmen*
- **Class Four: Just like this, only different: Comics and other media**
 - Look at comics in relation to film/animation, literature, art, and poetry
 - How constraints within the specific medium shape storytelling.
 - Matt Madden *99 Ways to Tell a Story*, Pat Stokes *Creativity from Constraints*
- **Class Five: Making Comics!**
 - A demonstration of the process of developing a comic page, individual panels...
 - This will be ongoing throughout the class – as we analyze, we also consider how to construct. Encourage assignments be submitted in comic book form – explore the creative side of the medium
 - Key Readings: Scott McCloud *Making Comics*, Madden & Abel *Drawing Words and Writing Pictures*
- **Class Six: A look behind the curtain: Process and practice**
 - Exploration of instructor's process and that of other comics makers (perhaps a guest speaker)
 - Can't draw? We'll be looking at tools to get around just that...
 - Key Readings: Molly Bang *Picture This*, Ann Marie Fleming *The Magical Life of Long Tack Sam*, Matt Feazel's *Cynicalman*, ComicLife (software)
- **Class Seven: The Shape of Our Thoughts: Visual thinking**
 - Discussion of the importance of visual thinking, how it has remained subordinate to the verbal, which has long been privileged at the expense of other ways of seeing.
 - Consider emerging notions of multi-modality and the way in which words and pictures interanimate one another on the comics page to create something beyond either.
 - In their multimodal, interlacing of visual and verbal, this language of juxtapositions that is comics facilitates the making of unexpected connections – comics are a literal means of lateral thinking and hence facilitate creative seeing and open new possibilities for discovery.
 - Key Readings: Susanne K. Langer, Rudolf Arnheim, Gunther Kress, Robert Root-Bernstein, Lynda Barry *Picture this*.
- **Class Eight: Comics and literacy Part 1: Show me a story...**
 - Examine how comics have been used for literacy education in and out of classrooms, in the U.S. and abroad.
 - Comics as a means of bridging discourses, expanding the reach of education, as Dewey (2005, 1934) said long ago, "The arts which today have most vitality for the average person are things he does not take to be arts: for instance, the movie, jazzed music, the comic strip..." (p. 4).
 - World Comics (Finland): <http://www.worldcomics.fi/>, Marek Bennett's international comics project: <http://comicsworkshop.wordpress.com/>
 - Comic Book Project: <http://www.comicbookproject.org/>
 - Making Curriculum Pop educational resource network: <http://mcpopmb.ning.com/group/graphicnovelscomics>.
 - Key Readings: Michael Bitz *When commas meet kryptonite*
- **Class Nine: Comics and literacy Part 2: Tell me a picture**
 - Continuing topics on literacy from the previous week
 - This is one of many places we'll have a chance to look at the prominence of Manga (Japanese comics)

- **Class Ten: Just Right: Relevant lit**
 - Readings of comics literature specifically applicable to the classroom. Ways to use relevant readings with particular ages.
 - Key Readings: Craig Thompson *Blankets*, Gene Luen Yang *American Born Chinese*, David Small *Stitches*
- **Class Eleven: Putting it all into practice**
 - Develop lessons, on teaching a piece, on making, on analyzing
 - How you would use comics in a classroom
 - Key Readings: Katie Monnin *Teaching graphic novels*, James Buck Carter *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels*.
 - Final culminating project discussed – considerations of how to foster literacy through comics in your own classroom; classroom approaches to engaging students multi-modally; explore the range of ways that comics might be incorporated into the classroom toward different ends.
- **Class Twelve: Commentary in Comics: The Political, Social, and Educative**
 - Importance of the comics in political discussion historically, exploration of the power of visual-verbal at conveying ideas, journalistic, and other uses of comics
 - Key Readings: excerpts from Peter Kuper, *World War III*, Neufeld's *A.D. After the Deluge*, Joe Sacco, Guibert/Lefevre *The Photographer*, Bryan Talbot *Alice in Sunderland*, Art Spiegelman *Maus*, Marjane Satrapi *Persepolis*, Ayers/Alexander-Tanner *To Teach*, Vaughn/Heinrichon *Pride of Baghdad*.
- **Class Thirteen: New Frontiers: Cutting Edge and Non-Comics Comics**
 - Explore experimental works – non-narrative. Haiku and comics, silent comics, other artistic experiments.
 - Key Readings: David Mazzucchelli *Asterios Polyp* and *City of Glass* (adaptation), Shaun Tan *The Arrival*, Eric Drooker *Flood*, Peter Kuper *The System*
- **Class Fourteen: Previously...**
 - Some recap of the ground we've covered – place to fill in missing pieces or new points that have emerged over our journey.
 - This might include issues of gender, identity, power, and others that might be explored through comics (this likely will come up throughout the term).
 - Presentations of final projects part one
- **Class Fifteen: Excelsior! (or "To be continued...")**
 - Presentations of final projects part two
 - Final (and all) projects uploaded to the wiki for continued discussion.
 - Wrap-up – closing thoughts.

Note about all Assignments/Exercises/Presentations:

Assignments and presentations will place emphasis on the practical and the creative. This will include developing ways comics can be incorporated into the classroom, reporting on how that has worked in practice, and making our own comics – to tell stories or to report on research we've done. To further the learning we will do together, we will also set up a wiki or blog to share works with one another outside of the classroom that can remain a resource after the term has drawn to a close. While there will be a class-wide set of assignments, we will individually tailor them to work with participants' particular interests in regards to how they will be putting comics to use outside of our classroom.

Invited speakers

The class will also involve invited guests who will add to the richness and diverse perspectives in our explorations of comics. These may include:

- Karen Green, Columbia University comics librarian, 2010 Eisner Judge
- Michael Bitz, Founder of the Comic Book Project
- R. Sikoryak, Host of Carousel – comics book performance/slideshow, author “Masterpiece Comics”
- Peter Kuper, countless political, literary comics
- Field Trips: MoCCA (Museum of Comic and Cartoon Art); Butler Library Comics/Graphic Novel Collection;

Requirements

- 20% - In-class participation which includes class discussions, several small in-class and out-of-class projects, reflections posted on the class wiki etc.
- 20% - Assignment one:
- 20% - Assignment two: Making a comic – explore the medium from the inside as a maker – no drawing experience required!
- 40% - Assignment three: Development of an approach in which to incorporate comics into the classroom. In depth exploration of the reasoning behind it, how it might unfold, resources that it builds from, and the ends for learning that it seeks.

Required Reading List

Madden, M. & Abel, J. *Drawing words and writing pictures*.

McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding comics*. Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, Inc.

Choose at least one: Monnin *Teaching graphic novels* or Carter *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels*.

Choose at least one: *Stitches*, *Blankets*, *Maus*, *Persepolis*, *A.D.*, *Alice in Sunderland*, or *To Teach*

Suggested Readings and References

Comics – or comics specific work

Alaniz, J. (2003). Into her dead body: Moore & Campbell’s ‘From Hell.’ In G.S. Millidge (Ed.), *Alan Moore: Portrait of an extraordinary gentleman* (pp. 145-149). Leigh-On-Sea, England: abiogenesis press.

Ayers, W., & Alexander-Tanner, R. (2010). *To teach: The journey in comics*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Bang, M. (2000). *Picture this: How pictures work*. San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books LLC.

Barry, L. (2010). *Picture this: The near-sighted monkey book*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly.

Bitz, M. *When commas meet kryptonite*.

Carter, J.B. *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels*.

Chute, H. (2009). History and graphic representation in *Maus*. In J. Heer & K. Worcester (Eds.), *A comics studies reader* (340-362). Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

the Comic Book Project: <http://www.comicbookproject.org/>

Drooker, E. *Flood*.

Eisner, W. *Comics and sequential art*.

Eisner, W. *Dropsie avenue: The neighborhood*.

Fleming, A.M. *The Magical Life of Long Tack Sam*.

- Gaiman, N. *The Sandman*.
- Goel, V. (1995). *Sketches of thought*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Gombrich, E.H. (2000, 1960). *Art and illusion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Groensteen, T. (2007). *The system of comics*. (B. Beaty & N. Nguyen, Trans.). Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.
- Guibert/Lefevre. *The photographer*.
- Harvey, R.C. (1979). The aesthetics of the comic strip. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, XII, 640-652.
- Harvey, R.C. (1996). *The art of the comic book: An aesthetic history*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi
- Kuper, P. *The system*.
- Madden, M. & Abel, J. *Drawing words and writing pictures*. [Drawing Words Writing Pictures SITE](#)
- Making Curriculum Pop educational resource network:
<http://mcpopmb.ning.com/group/graphicnovelscomics>
- On teaching graphic novels:
http://mcpopmb.ning.com/group/graphicnovelscomics/forum/topic/show?id=2665237%3ATopic%3A58150&xg_source=msg
- Mazzucchelli, D. *Asterios Polyp*.
- Mazzucchelli, D., & Karasik. *Paul Auster's City of glass*.
- McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding comics*. Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, Inc.
- McCloud, S. (2006). *Making comics*. New York: Harper.
- McKean, D. *Cages*.
- Monnin, K. [Teaching graphic novels](#)
- Moore, A., & Gebbie, M. (2002). This is Information. In *9-11 Artists Respond Vol. 1*. Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics.
- Moore, A., & Gibbons, D. (1987). *Watchmen*. New York: DC Comics Inc.
- Moore, A., & Lloyd, D. *V for vendetta*.
- Moore, A., & Campbell, E. *From hell*.
- Neufeld, J. (2009). *A.D. New Orleans after the deluge*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Ottaviani, etc. *Fallout*.
- Ottaviani, Cannon/Cannon. *T-minus: The race to the moon*.
- Pekar, H. & Haspiel, D. *The quitter*.
- Pekar, H., & various. *American splendor*.
- Sacco, J. *Palestine*.
- Satrapi, M. *Persepolis*.
- Small, D. *Stitches*.
- Spiegelman, A. (1997). *Maus: A survivor's tale*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Talbot, B. *Alice in Sunderland*.
- Tan, S. *The arrival*.
- Thompson, C. *Blankets*.
- Ware, Chris. (2000). *Jimmy Corrigan: The smartest kid on earth*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Relevant academic readings not comics specific

- Arnheim, R. (1997, 1969). *Visual thinking*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Bosman, J. (October 8, 2010). Picture books no longer a staple for children. *The New York Times* (online). Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/08/us/08picture.html>
- Dewey, J. (2005, 1934). *Art as experience*. New York: Perigree.
- Dobson, S. (February, 2005). [Review of the book *Literacy in the New Media Age*] *Seminar.net – International journal of media, technology and lifelong learning*. Retrieved from http://seminar.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=39&Itemid=1
- Kress, G., Jewitt, C., Ogborn, J., & Tsatsarelis, C. (2001). *Multimodal teaching and learning: The*

- rhetorics of the science classroom*. London & New York: Continuum.
- Kress, G. (2004). Reading images: Multimodality, representation and new media. *Expert Forum for Knowledge Presentation*. Retrieved from <http://www.knowledgepresentation.org/BuildingTheFuture/Kress2/Kress2.html>
- Hoffman, D. (1998). *Visual intelligence: How we create what we see*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.
- Kosslyn, S.M., Thompson, W.L., & Ganis, G. (2006). *The case for mental imagery*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lakoff G., and Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Langer, S.K. (2009, 1962). *Philosophical sketches*. New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc.
- Langer, S.K. (1957). *Philosophy in a new key: A study in the symbolism of reason, rite, and art (3rd ed.)*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lewis, D. (2001). *Reading contemporary picturebooks: Picturing text*. London and New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Root-Bernstein, R.S. (1985). Visual thinking: The art of imagining reality. *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, New Series, 75(6)*, 50-67.
- Tufte, E.R. (1990). *Envisioning information*. Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press LLC.
- Ware, Colin. (2008). *Visual thinking for design*. Burlington, MA: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers.
- Sullivan, G. (2005). *Art practice as research: Inquiry in the visual arts*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Suwa, M. and Tversky, B. (1997). What architects and students perceive in their sketches: A protocol analysis. *Design Studies, 18*, 385-403.
- Suwa, M., Tversky, B., Gero, J., and Purcell, T. (2001). Seeing into sketches: Regrouping parts encourages new interpretations. In J. S. Gero, B. Tversky, & T. Purcell (Eds.), *Visual and spatial reasoning in design, II*. (pp. 207-219). Sydney, Australia: Key Centre of Design Computing.

TC POLICIES:

Statement on accommodating persons with documented disabilities:

The College will make reasonable accommodations for persons with documented disabilities. Students are encouraged to contact the Office of Access and Services for Individuals with Disabilities for information about registration (166 Thorndike Hall). Services are available only to students who are registered and submit appropriate documentation. As your instructor, I am happy to discuss specific needs with you.

Incomplete Grades:

The grade of Incomplete is to be assigned only when the course attendance requirement has been met but, for reasons satisfactory to the instructor, the granting of a final grade has been postponed because certain course assignments are outstanding. If the outstanding assignments are completed within one calendar year from the date of the close of term in which the grade of Incomplete was received and a final grade submitted, the final grade will be recorded on the permanent transcript, replacing the grade of Incomplete with a transcript notation indicating the date that the grade of Incomplete was replaced by a final grade.

As of the Autumn term 2004, the Faculty has approved the following change in the policy on Incomplete grades. If the outstanding work is not completed within one calendar year from the dates of the close of the term in which the grade of Incomplete was received, the grade will remain as a permanent Incomplete on the transcript. In such instances, if the course is a required course or part of an approved program of study, students will be required to re-enroll in the course including repayment of all tuition and fee charges for the new registration and satisfactorily complete all course requirements. If the required course is not offered in subsequent terms, the student should speak with the faculty advisor or Program Coordinator about their options for fulfilling the degree requirement.

Religious Holidays:

It is the policy of Teachers College to respect its members' observance of their major religious holidays. Where academic scheduling conflicts prove unavoidable, no student will be penalized for absence due to religious reasons,

and alternative means will be sought for satisfying the academic requirements involved. If a suitable arrangement cannot be worked out between the student and the instructor, students and instructors should consult the appropriate Department Chair. If an additional appeal is needed, the matter may be taken to the Dean of the College. The Dean's Office also requests that if faculty will miss classes for religious observances, the Department Chair should be notified in advance. In such cases either alternative arrangements should be made for someone else to cover the class or the missed class should be made up at another time mutually convenient to students and the faculty member. If class will not be held, announcement to that effect should be made in the course syllabus.

Religious Observance:

It is the policy of the University to respect its members' observance of their major religious holidays. Where academic scheduling conflicts prove unavoidable, no student will be penalized for absence due to religious reasons, and alternative means will be sought for satisfying the academic requirements involved. If a suitable arrangement cannot be worked out between the student and the instructor, students and instructors should consult the appropriate department chair or director. If an additional appeal is needed, it may be taken to the Dean of the College. Some of the major holidays occurring during the current academic year are: Rosh Hashanah; Id al Fitr; Yom Kippur; Passover; First days of Succoth; Good Friday; Concluding days of Succoth; Id al Adha; Hanukkah; Shavuoth. The Jewish and Islamic holy days begin at sundown of the preceding day. It should be noted that because of the size of the event and the space available, convocations held at Commencement take place in either Riverside Church or the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. The facilities are used in a non-sectarian manner.