**Teachers College Columbia University**
**A&HE:** 5151 (CRN TBD)
Popular Texts: Focus on Comics in Teaching and Learning
(Comics as Education – understanding, making, and teaching)
*NOTE: This is a draft version of the syllabus as of 11/5/13*

Instructor: Nick Sousanis, nsousanis@gmail.com, comics site: www.spinweaveandcut.com
Spring 2014 (3 Credits)
Thursday 5:10-6:50pm
Class resource wiki: http://comicsclassroom.wikispaces.com/

As Alice said: *"What is the use of a book … without pictures or conversations?"*

**Course description**

Comics have arrived as an important means for educating. From their well-documented uses as literacy tools to receiving widespread recognition for their role in fostering student engagement, comics are increasingly being adopted by educators and are on their way to becoming a permanent fixture in classrooms and other educational settings. While many teachers are eager and enthusiastic to embrace comics in their classrooms, an understanding of the medium and the diversity of comic book genres and creators remains very much foreign territory.

This course is intended to bridge that knowledge gap and aid participants in developing approaches in which to confidently incorporate comics into their particular classroom settings. Through a collaborative, in depth interdisciplinary investigation of the various genres and significant works, participants will gain a thorough understanding and appreciation of the comics medium. Theory will be rooted in concurrent practice – participants, regardless of drawing skills, will engage in their own comics-making explorations as a prominent component of their study for the course. Regular workshop discussions using participants' own creations will help foster a better understanding of the language of comics and the inner workings of the medium from the inside out. These ongoing visual exercises will also fuel conversations regarding the importance of visual literacy and how visual thinking might be better integrated alongside the verbal-linguistic. Comics' unique position between the visual and verbal make them not only a tool for acquiring traditional literacies, but also an important and rich medium for expression and serious inquiry in their own right.

Together, we will embark on a journey of study and practice, making and application that will ultimately lead to the development of ways to enrich our classrooms and our students. We will tailor the class for the particular needs of each individual, while simultaneously relying on one another to bring a different set of eyes from which we can gain a more comprehensive picture of the wildly diverse and expansive comics' landscape.

**Objectives in brief**

In this class, we will:

1. Examine the workings/language of comics, unpack how to read them and help others navigate through them.

2. Grasp the spatial integration of visual and verbal that defines a comics page and gain an appreciation of how comics' unique integration of verbal and visual reading/viewing modes makes them stand apart as a distinct medium.

3. 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;

4. Undergo our own explorations in making comics by engaging in serious play coupled with workshop-based discussions over what we've created;

5. Reconsider notions of literacy – through lenses of multimodality and visual thinking;

6. Consider as a group ways in which we might incorporate comics in the classroom and develop individual 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 encounters that we'll have together throughout the term. Given that participants all come with a different set of experiences with and exposure to 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. 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. Throughout, we will be making comics, and elements of what's learned through the making will tie in to the class discussion of the week.

- **Class One: Origin Story, A short history of comics**
    o Introductions, explore participants' background/experience with comics, and begin to set out our individual and overall aims for the course.
    o Establish a historical lineage of comics and examine visual narratives through the ages and a time when the divide between art and language wasn't so far.
    o Explore the roots of the historic anti-comics bias, and significant works that have led to that reversal.
    o Briefly delve into 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.
    o Key Readings: McCloud *Understanding Comics*
- **Class Two: Strange new worlds, what's out there?, a look at various genres, titles**
    o Special guest (or field trip): Comics Librarian at Columbia University Karen Green – introduce the collection and resources available on comics.
    o 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.
- **Class Three: Sequential Art, fragments and juxtapositions**
    o Read through McCloud's *Understanding Comics* alongside instructor-suggested. Begin examining characteristics of how comics work through specific examples.
    o Continuation of discussion of comics as part of a visual tradition.
    o Explore McCloud's notion of "closure" and how he situates the reader as participant in a "Reader Response" sort of way.
    o Consider how McCloud's definition opened wide what comics could be and what has sprung from that redefinition.
    o Key Readings: McCloud *Understanding Comics*
- **Class Four: Time is Space, Weaving less-than-linear Narratives**

- o Comics possess a dual nature – read sequential like text, they are also viewed all-at-once like art. Take up the unique position between viewing modes that comics make possible and how they thus are distinct in storytelling approaches from film and literature.
  - o Look at comics in relation to film/animation, literature, art, and poetry
  - o Draw on Thierry Groensteen's opposing definition of comics in his "The System of Comics"
  - o Art Spiegelman's notion of a comics page as an Architectonic unit.
  - o Look at works from comics makers who exploit the spatial possibilities of comics, including Alan Moore, Chris Ware, Gasoline Alley, etc.
- **Class Five: The Shape of Our Thoughts, visual thinking**
  - o 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.
  - o How constraints within the specific medium shape storytelling.
    - ▪ Matt Madden *99 Ways to Tell a Story*, Pat Stokes *Creativity from Constraints*
  - o Key Readings: Susanne K. Langer, Rudolf Arnheim, Lynda Barry *Picture this,* Molly Bang *Picture This.*
- **Class Six: Visual-verbal blending, a perfect union**
  - o Looking at history of comics as emerging from interdependence of image and text.
  - o Consider the way in which words and pictures interanimate one another on the comics page to create something beyond either.  (Lead in to Multimodality)
  - o On the comics page – text becomes a visual element.
  - o Exploration of visual-verbal mind maps, Sketch noting, etc.
  - o R.C. Harvey's definition of comics and long-standing argument with McCloud.
  - o Key Readings: R.C. Harvey, N.C. Christopher Couch, Edward Tufte, visualizing websites
- **Class Seven: Multimodality, the seemingly simple is really complex**
  - o Consider comics' inherent multimodality – how they can convey multiple layers of meaning via visual means all-at-once.
  - o Comics facilitate the making of unexpected connections making them a literal means of lateral thinking and hence facilitate creative seeing and open new possibilities for discovery.
  - o A look at different comics scripts, adaptations in comics form and how they differ.
  - o Key Readings: Gunther Kress, David Mazzucchelli *Asterios Polyp,* David Mazzucchelli *City of Glass* (adaptation), Robert Root-Bernstein.
- **Class Eight: Relevant Readings**
  - o Readings of comics literature specifically applicable to the classroom. Ways to use relevant readings with particular ages.
  - o Comparison and contrast of how different comics texts express their narrative.
  - o Key Readings: Craig Thompson *Blankets*, Gene Luen Yang *American Born Chinese*, David Small *Stitches,* Alison Bechdel *Fun Home*, Paul Hornschemeier *Mother, Come Home,* Marjane Satrapi *Persepolis,* Art Spiegelman *Maus*
- **Class Nine: Comics and literacy: Show me a story/Tell me a picture**
  - o Examine how comics have been used for literacy education in and out of classrooms, in the U.S. and abroad.
  - o Reading with Pictures Project
  - o World Comics (Finland): http://www.worldcomics.fi/, Marek Bennett's international comics project: http://comicsworkshop.wordpress.com/
  - o Comic Book Project: http://www.comicbookproject.org/
  - o Making Curriculum Pop educational resource network: http://mcpopmb.ning.com/group/graphicnovelscomics.

- o This is one of many places we'll have a chance to look at the prominence of Manga
  - o Key Readings: Michael Bitz *When commas meet kryptonite*
- **Class Ten: Your philosophy – visualized**
  - o Presentations of major assignment #1, visual-verbal statement of one's educational philosophy.
  - o Discussion of how exploring ideas both visually and verbally lead to new discoveries than through a single mode.
  - o Robert Root-Bernstein.
- **Class Eleven: Developing a Comics Classroom**
  - o Review of books on using comics in the classroom.
  - o Look at the research on comics as literacy tool, as fostering student engagement.
  - o Develop lessons, on teaching a piece, on making, on analyzing
  - o Key Readings: Katie Monnin *Teaching graphic novels,* James Bucky Carter *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels,* Maureen Bakis *The Graphic Novel Classroom*. Research studies including Hosler, et al.
  - o 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 incorporated into the classroom toward different ends.
- **Class Twelve: Making comics in the classroom – Process and practice**
  - o Exploration of process from various comics makers (perhaps a guest speaker)
  - o Comics exercises
  - o Mini-comics
  - o Can't draw? We'll be looking at tools to get around just that…
  - o Key Readings: Molly Bang *Picture This*, Ann Marie Fleming *The Magical Life of Long Tack Sam*, Matt Feazel's *Cynicalman*, ComicLife (software)
  - o Explore experimental works – non-narrative. Haiku and comics, silent comics, other artistic experiments.
  - o Key Readings: Shaun Tan *The Arrival*, Eric Drooker *Flood*, Peter Kuper *The System*
- **Class Thirteen: Commentary in Comics: The Political, Social, Medicine, and Educative**
  - o Importance of the comics in political discussion historically, exploration of the power of visual-verbal at conveying ideas, journalistic, and other uses of comics including narrative medicine, gender, identity issues, etc.
  - o Burgeoning field of Comics Journalism
    - ▪ Dan Archer (TED talk)
  - o 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,* Ayers/Alexander-Tanner *To Teach,* Vaughn/Heinrichon *Pride of Baghdad*.
- **Class Fourteen: Previously…**
  - o Some recap of the ground we've covered – placeholder to fill in missing pieces or new points that have emerged over our journey.
  - o Presentations of final projects part one
- **Class Fifteen: Excelsior! (or "To be continued…")**
  - o Presentations of final projects part two
  - o Final (and all) projects uploaded to web-presence for continued discussion.
  - o Wrap-up – closing thoughts.

**Invited speakers**

The class will also involve invited guests who will add to the richness and diverse approaches in our explorations of comics. Given New York City's rich history with comic books, there are a multitude of creators and experts on the medium that we may draw on to join us to share their particular perspective on comics. This will always include a trip to the Columbia Library and a conversation with comics librarian Karen Green.

**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% - Making Assignments:  Ongoing, explore the medium from the inside as a maker – no drawing experience required!
- 20% - Major Assignment One: Statement of educational philosophy in visual-verbal form.
    - What informs your perspective, what shapes your view or your vision (as this will be visual) of what's important to you about education/teaching/learning – can include autobiographical, influential readings, all experiences that shaped your emerging philosophy of education. As with all our projects – this should be of USE to YOU.
- 40% - Major Assignment Two: Development of an approach in which to incorporate comics into participant's particular educational setting. This can include such things as developing a syllabus for a possible course using comics with students, a detailed lesson plan, looking at comics theory alongside existing educational theories. May be a detailed proposal for a hypothetical situation in your future or something enacted in a setting and reported on during the term.
    - Consider presentation of this work as something to contribute to a conference, journal article/chapter, or professional development session on using comics in an educational setting.

**Required Reading List**
McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding comics.* Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, Inc.
There will be other required readings including a comics text that might be used in a classroom, and a text on using comics in the classroom. Highly recommended readings include Madden & Abel, Bakis (see below).

**Suggested Readings and References**
**Comics or text on comics and understanding and making comics**
McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding comics.* Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, Inc.
McCloud, S. (2006). *Making comics.* New York: Harper.
Madden, M. & Abel, J. *Drawing words and writing pictures.* Drawing Words Writing Pictures SITE
Madden, M. *99 Ways to tell a story.*
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.
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

**On using comics in the classroom:**
Bakis, M. (2011). *The graphic novel classroom.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
Bitz, M. *When commas meet kryptonite*.
Carter, J.B. *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels.*
Monnin, K. *The graphic novel classroom (website Teaching graphic novels)*

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%3A581
50&xg_source=msg
the Comic Book Project: http://www.comicbookproject.org/
Ayers, W., & Alexander-Tanner, R. (2010). *To teach: The journey in comics.* New York: Teachers
 College Press. [Work about education entirely in comic book form]
**Comics/Graphic Novels highly recommended texts/authors**
Drooker, E. *Flood*.
Eisner, W. *Comics and sequential art.*
Eisner, W. *Contract with God., Dropsie avenue: The neighborhood., etc….*
Fleming, A.M. *The Magical Life of Long Tack Sam*.
Gaiman, N, & various. *The Sandman.*
Guibert/Lefevre. *The photographer.*
Kuper, P. *The system.*
Mazzucchelli, D. *Asterios Polyp.*
Mazzucchelli, D., & Karasik. *Paul Auster's City of glass*.
McKean, D. *Cages*.
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., & 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.
Ware, Chris. (2012). *Building stories*.

**Relevant academic readings not necessarily comics specific**
Arnheim, R. (1997, 1969). *Visual thinking.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
Dewey, J. (2005, 1934). *Art as experience.* New York: Perigree.
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.
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
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.

## 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 as well.

**Incomplete Grades**:
The grade of Incomplete will 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. If the outstanding work is not completed within one calendar year from the date of the close of 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. Doctoral students with six or more credits with grades of Incomplete included on their program of study will not be allowed to sit for the certification exam.

**UNI/Email Activation:**
Teachers College students have the responsibility for activating the Columbia University Network ID (UNI) and a free TC Gmail account. As official communications from the College – e.g., information on graduation, announcements of closing due to severe storm, flu epidemic, transportation disruption, etc. -- will be sent to the student's TC Gmail account, students are responsible for either reading email there, or, for utilizing the mail forwarding option to forward mail from their account to an email address which they will monitor.

**Religious Observance:**
It is the policy of Teachers College to respect its members' observance of their major religious holidays. Students should notify instructors at the beginning of the semester about their wishes to observe holidays on days when class sessions are scheduled. 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 Provost.

**Academic Integrity:**
Students who intentionally submit work either not their own or without clear attribution to the original source, fabricate data or other information, engage in cheating, or misrepresentation of academic records may be subject to charges. Sanctions may include dismissal from the college for violation of the TC principles of academic and professional integrity fundamental to the purpose of the College.