Teach Your Children Well

By Karen Green

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The word for this month is…pedagogy. From the Greek: "leading a child," or, strategies for teaching. Write that down in your copybook now.

Over the past month or so, I've been knocking up against people teaching with comics in ways I hadn't expected. Even though I know full well there are those who use the actual creation of comics as the basis of a course, I still tend to think of comics as another manner of text on a syllabus, something that adds a new dimension to an assigned topic. But more and more I'm seeing other possibilities.

As, for example, when I ventured well out of my comfort zone this past December to talk to a Brooklyn middle school class about graphic novels. Now, lord knows I love talking about using comics in teaching, but as you all know I tend to bang that "comics in academia" drum, and I honestly didn't know what I was going to say about comics to a class of 12-year-olds. I didn't know how to talk to 12-year-olds when I was a 12-year-old. So how did this even come about?

Well, it seems that a Columbia organization, the Center for Environmental Research and Conservation (CERC), does educational outreach with a number of New York City middle schools on a variety of topics, all of which were part of something called "Integrated Project Week," or IPW. During this IPW, the class immerses itself in a variety of elements around their given topic on the way to creating some kind of original work. One teacher, at this school in Brooklyn, wanted to use graphic novels as her point of orientation, and the end result would be each student creating an original graphic short story. So, the staff at CERC wanted to know, would I go talk to her class?
I was reluctant, I won’t deny it; my whole spiel is based on how different my issues are from school or public library issues. But I agreed because…well, because, frankly, I’m a big ol’ ham. Then, after I agreed, I learned that the class had gone to see the movie "Twilight" as inspiration for their stories, which were going to have a vampire theme.

Now, I have no beef with vampires—I still remember being 11 years old, curled up on the couch next to my sister, each of us clutching sofa pillows for dear life as we watched Tod Browning put Bela Lugosi through his Dracula paces…and my love for "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" knows no equal—but I just thought that these kids deserved a better vampire introduction than "Twilight." Who am I, however, to quibble with novels that have spent a combined 143 weeks on the New York Times Bestseller List? And, as my mother used to say when she found me engrossed in something not quite up to her standards, "At least she’s reading!"

So I prepared a slideshow with a little history of visual narrative, just like I’d done for the Mississippi librarians, and I added a cultural history of vampires—from Bram Stoker and 19th-century Goth babesthrough Nosferatu to films serious, humorous, or political and on to comics. The students had already read a wide variety of graphic novels and some had very decided ideas on where their stories were going to go: "My vampire is a ninja assassin!" one young man crowed to me.

It wasn't until after I'd left that I realized I'd done those students a disservice, talking about subjects, but not substance. I'd never addressed, for example, how vampires are used as signifiers: how, in "Twilight," the relationship between tweener human girl and ageless vampire boy stands for the unfulfilled sexual longing that all good tweener boys and girls are expected to keep good and unfulfilled.

Vampires almost always have something to do with sex, after all…for Bram Stoker, they embodied the erotic passion that sullied Edwardian women’s purity; in "Buffy," a teenage girl’s birthday deflowering results in her nice boy turning all vicious the morning after (trust Joss Whedon to incarnate all of high school’s worst horrors); and, for Stephanie Meyer, sex itself becomes the danger that both vampire and human must resist through endless cuddling.

Yeah, well, maybe that would have been more than a middle school class really needed to hear—but did they realize that was the subtext when they went to the movie? What were their reasons going to be for including vampires in their stories?

Maybe they’d feel safer with Life Sucks, in which Jessica Abel and Gabriel Soria invert the human-demon world, nicely drawn by Warren Pleece. There it's the human who generates all the erotic buzz while the outsider nature of the vampire is manifested in his hapless nerdiness amidst the innately banal nature of vampire society: the vampire boy slings quarts of milk at the Last Stop convenience store while pining for the human girl selling Goth regalia at the Diva’s Dungeon.
I hear that the kids’ short stories were a terrific success, by the way; I just wish I’d had a chance to see some of them.

Moving on from middle school back into my academic neighborhood, I went to the Graphica in Education conference held on January 31st at Fordham University. "Graphica" is one of those words being tested to encompass the totality of newspaper comics, comic books, graphic novels, manga, whatever—with uncertain success. (At one session, Jimmy Gownley, creator of *Amelia Rules!,* coined the term "illiterature," for "illustrated literature.")

This conference looked at every aspect of using …illiterature in teaching, from the youngest kids to the university. A session with Kent Worcester, of Marymount Manhattan College, and Bill Kartolopoulos, of the New School, explored one approach to teaching comics; in each of their classes, for example, they used Richard McGuire’s extraordinary formalist comic "Here" as an introduction to understanding comics' structure and the unique challenges of reading sequential art.

My favorite new example of using comics in teaching, though, was demonstrated in a session led by three graduate students in English from Northern Michigan University in Marquette MI: Kyle Bladow, Alison Spaude, and Ben Wielechowski. After having their freshman composition students read the ubiquitous Scott McCloud, as well as a short list of graphic novels such as *Persepolis, Fun Home,* and *The Cute Manifesto,* the instructors ask each student to create a brief comic—say, 9 to 16 panels—and then use each panel to generate a section of a prose narrative.

These three slyly give their students two lessons for the price of one, allowing them to discover how to build a story in visual beats as well as how to create a prose story that is fully fleshed out descriptively as well as focused narratively. Ben remarked that, in his own
writing, when his narrative has felt a little flat, he’s created a comic from the prose and noticed that it was, say, overly filled with white space. Filling in the visuals in the comic panels has inspired him to go back and invest his prose narrative with new life.

We participants were invited to try the exercise ourselves: our handout included a strip of three empty panels, and we were given ten minutes to draw a comic based on any event from the day before. We were assured that our drawing skill was not going to be assessed and, in fact, Alison drew a quick panel with stick figures to show us just how minimalist we could be, which was quite a relief for a talentless hack like myself.

My previous day's event of choice was a new faculty luncheon, designed to get researchers and librarians to mingle, but I had found no faculty in my discipline there. Instead, I chatted with two law school research fellows, a Portuguese linguistics scholar, and a professor of environmental sustainability. Sharing no common scholarly ground, I ended up talking about comics with them, which turned out to be a rousing success. Below you'll find my humble artistic rendering of the experience. Be kind.
One of my fellow attendees was a graphic artist, who really put us text-bound folks to shame. Kyle, Alison, and Ben noted that this artistic aspect was the most stressful for their students, some of whom feared that their grade would be based in part on their talent in drawing (it's not).

I suggested that the three of them show their students the webcomic xkcd, to demonstrate just how much can be accomplished with stick-figure drawing, although I'd say I have a ways to go to reach even Randall Munroe's level of proficiency.

Basically, there are as many ways to use comics in teaching as there are to use, well, books in teaching. I.e., innumerable. The conversations will continue—and, in fact, will be continuing at the New York Comic-Con tonight, at 7 PM, at a panel I'm moderating called "Graphic Novels and Academic Acceptance." I know, I know: 7 PM?? But c'mon! There'll be cupcakes! Learning is sweet!

Karen Green is Columbia University's Ancient/Medieval Studies Librarian and Graphic Novel selector.

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