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Graphic Novels as Pedagogy in Social Studies

How to Draw Citizenship

Angelo J. Letizia

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This book is dedicated to all those students who are doing cool things which are not graded or recognized. Keep working at them.

Preface

I love comic books. I have always loved comic books for as long as I can remember. This should not come as too much of shock since I am writing this book, but the important point is that I have loved comic books way longer than I have been a supposedly respectable academic researcher. (The respectable part is still up to debate.) As such, this type of research has been very different for me. I am researching something I loved as a child, and still love as an adult. Perhaps mostly importantly, the research and scholarly interpretation of comics has drastically changed how I see comics. For most of my life I have read comics as a fan, primarily as a diversion and to be entertained. Now as a researcher, after reading interpretations and theories on many characters and the medium itself, I have new tools and ideas to understand comics. I do not simply see comics as entertainment anymore, rather, I see them as a medium rife with pedagogical possibility. This book will expound on this central idea, that comics and the mechanics of the medium are well suited to pedagogy, specifically social studies pedagogy and the teaching of citizenship. More on that in a moment.[1]

[1] A note on terminology. Comic books are generally serial in nature, whereas graphic novels are usually longer and the subject matter is considered more serious. Graphic novels are also bounded into book form and sold at book stores. The term graphic novel is usually deemed more respectable. However, many graphic novels are simply a number of smaller comics bounded together into book format (Duncan, Smith, & Levitz, 2015; Fish, 2010; Gabilliet, 2010; Maslon & Kantor, 2013). Furthermore, some comics theorists

Yet, I think both sides of this are important. On the one side is the 13-year-old kid in me who rode his bicycle to the comic shop and bought Batman and X-Men comics. On the other side is the professor with the Ph.D. Both sides bring a unique perspective to this topic. While the researcher may seem the more respectable, we should listen to the kid—in all fairness he was here first. It was the kid who first recognized the ability of comics to convey a range of ideas and emotions. I distinctly remember reading *Batman* #520 (1995) written by Doug Moench and drawn by Eduardo Barreto. In this comic, both Batman (Bruce Wayne) and gruff detective Harvey Bullock, experience a type of loss. Wayne recalls the death of his parents, and reaffirms his oath, in fact he screams it at the top of a building in a raging lightning storm. In the same issue, Bullock has a date with a nurse who he cares tenderly for, only to watch her be gunned down by a criminal. Then there was the little mutant girl in Busek and Ross's (1994) *Marvels*. She has large eyes and looks visibly different, but she huddles in the closet and is petrified. The prejudice the mutants are subjected to is unrelenting and all too life-like. You cannot help but feel her pain.

I read both of these comics as a teenager. More than just powerful stories, the characters resonated with me. As a moody and lonely teen, I saw a little of myself in Batman, the Dark Knight who forsakes human contact, as well as the marginalization of the little girl. The point here is that even as a teenager, I recognized how comics could be powerful things, even if I was just looking to be entertained. Looking back now, I think what I felt was a visceral raw connection to a wild and fantastic story. Even as a form of escape, comics always had a practical function for me—imagination. I know this can be done with prose or television, but at least for me, there was something special about the fantastic worlds and situations that comics asked you to accept as natural. Comics force you to expand your thoughts, your point of view, they demand that you stretch your mind. Aliens, monsters, robots all become integral to the stories. While I have no empirical test to prove this, I truly believe that my love of comics helped to foster my imagination.

are not comfortable this label (Duncan et al., 2015; Maslon & Kantor, 2013). In this work, I will usually refer to "comics and graphic novels" to be as inclusive as possible. However, as Duncan and colleagues (2015) point out, the internet has opened up new avenues for comics as well, and those webcomics and internet comics could plausibly be used in the assignments that I propose as well.

Fan hat off. Researcher hat back on. As noted before, one specific aspect that I believe comics can help us with is citizenship. I do not claim that comics can make us better citizens. My goal is much more modest. All I argue in this book is that comics may help students (as well as their professors) grapple with some thorny citizenship issues in new ways. As a social studies teacher by trade, and now a social studies methods instructor (among other classes as well), teaching critical thinking and citizenship has always been close to my heart. Moreover, as I will discuss at length in the book, citizenship is a complex phenomenon which is only further complicated by the bewildering state of reality we find ourselves in. I will argue that comics, both the analysis of them, as well as the creation of them, may help us find our way as citizens and people in this volatile age where truth is in question. However, I do not just limit this to social studies teachers and those who instruct social studies teachers. I think all professors and teachers can utilize ideas of citizenship.

In addition to my role as fan and researcher, I am also an artist. As a child, one of the reasons I gravitated toward comics was because comics gave me the fodder I needed to create my own heroes and alternate universes. My early drawings, from elementary school into high school were mostly rip offs of existing heroes. I prized faithful reproduction of existing drawings. My main goal was to see how much I could get my drawing to look like Jim Lee's or whoever. Art for me was always ornament, eye candy. However, as I began to delve into the research on comics, I came to quickly realize that art and text are partners. Both aspects help tell the story in conjunction with each other. Moreover, not just the art, but the panels, word balloons, and other devices all help to tell the story. So, this got me thinking, could art and text also be used to grapple with citizenship? Could art, text, the combination of the two, and all the devices in comics help students convey unique ideas about citizenship? I believe so. This book is my answer to that question.

All the while I have gone down the researcher path, part of me wondered if I was overthinking, or if I somehow stamped out the sheer joy of comics that I felt as a kid. Did I overanalyze Batman? Should I just enjoy the story? I wrestled with this thought for a while, but in the end, I concluded that my love of comics has been infinitely enriched by scholarly knowledge. However, I am also careful to never extinguish that pure love of comics that I felt as a child and teenager, that visceral connection with the stories and characters. Wright (2003, xi) notes something similar "And while the years of research and analysis have made it difficult for me

to ever simply 'enjoy' reading a comic book again, this scholarly inquiry has ultimately confirmed what I first realized as a young boy: comic books are cool!" I agree. Comics are cool and fun. But at the same time, they can be made to serve a higher purpose (perhaps precisely because they are cool and fun?). I think the pleasure of comics can be harnessed and joined to the academic (and dare I say it—sometimes dry and boring) theories of citizenship to create something truly spectacular. I also think it important to note here that many of the features of comics (e.g., word text combinations) can be found in other venues (Miodrag, 2013). While this book focuses on the comics medium, I would be remiss if I did not note that some of what I argue may be accomplished with other media. However, I do believe the comics medium is uniquely suited to achieve the tasks laid out in this book.

Structure of the Book

The first chapter of the book serves as the introduction. Here, I try to weave together various strands of thought to show why the reading and creating of comics is a good fit for teaching citizenship in the present age. I tried not to scare away teachers. I wanted to create assignments that teachers could actually use and modify. I struggled with the theory—practice divide. I did not want to create a theory-dump. This book is meant to be practical. I know a number of colleagues who disdain what they see as abstract theory. With that said, a total disdain of theory I think is shortsighted. Theory is vital to progress—as is action. Here, I invoke Freire's (2000) notion of praxis. Praxis holds that action without reflection is largely ineffective and vice versa. We need both to truly progress. So could a teacher skip the first chapter and still implement the activities? Probably. But I think the theoretical context frames the comic activities and shows why they are suitable and I would argue necessary, to the age we live in, and not simply fun diversions from normally boring classroom practice. Moreover, the first chapter forms the foundation and inspiration for all the activities in the later chapters.

The next four chapters consist of two larger components—reading and writing comics. The first component, which encompasses Chapters 2 and 3, is the student reading component. These two chapters will explore how students can read comics and graphic novels in a number of ways that may help them grapple with citizenship. Chapter 2 is comprised of a wide variety of assignments that deal with reading comics and graphic

novels, while Chapter 3 also contains reading activities, but this chapter specifically centers on leadership and symbolism.

Some of the reason for this pairing was due to organizational concerns of the book. Structurally it made sense because of the amount of leadership and symbolic assignments combined made for a good chapter length. However, I also chose to put these two topics together because of what I believe to be the importance of symbolism in the act of leadership (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Pfeffer, 2000). While all the symbolic exercises do not specifically pertain to leadership, in a wider sense, all leaders may need to be cognizant of the symbolic nature of their actions. Also, for brevity, I have utilized the term symbolism in the title for both Chapters 3 and 5, but I explore symbols, imagery, and other pertinent ideas as well.

Chapters 4 and 5 comprise the second component of the book, which is student comic creation. Chapter 4 offers a number of creation exercises. Chapter 5 centers on leadership and symbolism in students' comic creation. In Chapters 4 and 5, students must use the features of the comic's medium, such as panel size, sequencing, and symbolism to name a few, to convey ideas related to citizenship. I provide these frameworks not as immutable doctrines, but rather rough guides for teachers and professors to utilize and adapt to their own purposes as they see fit.

There are approximately 50 activities in this book. These activities are diverse and require different types of tasks for students to perform. One of the reviewers of the book noted that this wide array could be problematic. I needed a way to join these disparate activities under one umbrella. So I turned to an old friend: Bloom's taxonomy. My teacher education program utilized Bloom's taxonomy, which seems to be fairly common for many teacher prep programs (Argawal, 2019). The revised taxonomy enumerates six cognitive functions (see the table below) and four types of knowledge. The original taxonomy looked not only at the cognitive dimension, but also at the psychomotor and affective dimensions, with frameworks for each. I am focusing here on the cognitive dimension, but as Woolfork (2016) points out, most activities in learning embody all three dimensions. Further, Bloom's taxonomy can be used to stimulate higher order thinking in the social studies in a variety of ways (Banks, McGee-Banks, & Clegg, 1999; Chapin, 2015; Larson, 2017).

Chapters 2 through 5 align with certain cognitive functions in the taxonomy. The reading component, contained in Chapters 2 and 3, calls for students to understand, apply, analyze, and evaluate comics and graphic novels. Chapter's 4 and 5 promote the creative function of the taxonomy.

The four chapters will also have a continuity to them because I draw on many of the same ideas in each of these sections. For instance, the framework in Chapter 2 has students look at graphic novels to identify emotional responses, but I also have students drawing emotional responses in Chapter 4 as well. So, I believe these two components, while disparate, can be joined together.

Of course, as Boslaugh (2019) recounts, there have been a number of criticisms of the taxonomy; such as: the taxonomy presents learning as a linear activity when in fact learning is compared to a web, the "taxonomy is overly precise and that the distinct categories make the process of learning seem more organized than it really is," and the taxonomy places too much emphasis on the individual. Case (2013) vehemently argues that the taxonomy (or at least the ways in which the taxonomy has been used in classrooms and instruction) is actually destructive because among other flaws, the taxonomy may lull educators into thinking they are stimulating enough critical thinking by simply employing some magic verbs. I grant all of these criticisms. Nevertheless, I still think the taxonomy has value (maybe old habits just die hard). For one, it has an organizational value, it allows teachers to conceive of different cognitive tasks (even if these tasks are not as discreet as they appear in the taxonomy). Secondly, even if the levels are too artificial, I think they embody what good citizens must do. Citizens must evaluate information, they must apply and analyze it, and they must create new information.

Chapters 2 and 3 are built around the taxonomy, with an emphasis on levels 2 through 5. Chapters 4 and 5 will focus mainly on the sixth level, creation. However, Krathwohl (2002) notes that there is also an overlap between the six levels as well. Below is a condensed version of the cognitive processes (Krathwohl, 2002, 215).

Table 1 This is a condensed version of Bloom's revised taxonomy

Level	*Cognitive process*	*Subdivisions of process*
6	Create	Generating, Planning, Producing
5	Evaluate	Critiquing, Checking
4	Analyze	Differentiating, Organizing, Attributing
3	Apply	Implementing, Executing
2	Understand	Summarizing, Interpreting, Comparing, Inferring
1	Remember	Recalling, Recognizing

My aim is not to pigeonhole every framework and rubric I make into one of the levels of Bloom's taxonomy. Rather, I think the functions enumerated on the chart above can give teachers a rough approximation of some of the tasks they might perform in regards to the activities in this book. In the end, I think Bloom's taxonomy can help to unify the disparate tasks the activities in this book require. Of course, anyone using this taxonomy should take heed of the criticisms and realize that learning is messy and complicated.

The final chapter tackles a few issues. First is assessment. Assessment is obviously of crucial importance. The methodology of this entire book is aligned with many tenets of action research, where teachers perform the research themselves in their classrooms and monitor the results and use this information to continually re-implement the assignments (Mertler, 2020; Schwarz, 2013). I have assigned many of the activities in this book to my classes, I monitored the results and used the various feedback (student comments, course, evaluations etc.,) to help me implement the assignments the next time I taught. My goal is admittedly difficult to measure: to allow students to navigate our volatile age where no one is really sure what is true. So, I figured the best way to assess this was simply to do it. These results I think give some evidence of what I was aiming for and show how teachers can evaluate these types of assignments. Assessment of these types of citizenship concerns work to link the activities in this book more closely to the ideas of citizenship in our volatile age and to give some evidence how students come to grapple with those ideas. Obviously, this will look different in different classrooms and with different students, but examples from real life I think are illustrative how the frameworks and exercises actually might work.

This chapter will also deal with questions of suitability and justification. Namely, I will examine how the use of graphic novels in the classroom, both the analysis of existing graphic novels and the creation of mini-comics, may be justified in the face of time constraints and testing pressures. I also include a list of comics and graphic novels which I believe can be used to teach about citizenship.

Finally, the book will conclude with a short appendix which includes excerpts from my own attempts to create a graphic novel. Thompson (2018) and Carter (2013) both argue that teachers may want to create their own comics if they assign them to students to truly understand the process. Creating a comic allows the teacher to work through the creative process with the students. I followed their advice and have created

my own graphic novel. In this creative work, I try to achieve what I am asking my students to do. I wanted to basically put my money where my mouth was and dive into the creative process myself to show students and readers exactly what I am advocating.

Okay—let's do this!

Baltimore, USA Angelo J. Letizia

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There are some specific people I would like to mention. First and foremost is my brother-in-law Randy Perison. Our relationship I think demonstrates how comics can bring people together. In early 2005, my wife (at the time she was my girlfriend) brought me as a guest to her brother's wedding. It would be the first time I met her extended family. I was obviously nervous. To assuage my fear, she told me that her brother

loved comic books like me so we would have that in common. Sure enough, there was a Superman statue at his table. We spoke briefly about our love of comics, especially Superman. Since then, comics have brought us together. He has let me borrow a number of important comics from his very large collection of comics. His encyclopedic knowledge of comics has been a boon. Most importantly, his insightful analyses and critiques of comics, and our subsequent discussions over the years, led me to see that comics are more than just child's entertainment. He is currently a middle school math teacher and he has created a "hero club." This is an after school club where he invites students to talk about comic books and character issues. He told me that our discussions, at least in part, helped him to create this club. In turn, our discussions over the previous decade no doubt inspired me to create this book.

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CHAPTER 1

Comics and Hyperreality

This book is about comic books and citizenship. These may seem to be an odd couple at first, but this book will show how they might not be such strange bedfellows after all. This coupling depends on a vastly changed notion of society and citizenship, described below.

Society and Citizen

Citizenship is at the heart of this book, but the term needs explication. A brief definition that I will offer at the outset, and which I explain more sufficiently later in the chapter, is as follows: citizenship can be thought of as living in and participating in, indeed refining, continuously and in response to new obstacles, governments by the people and for the people. This constant refinement of governmental structures should always be centered on justice and fairness, and for advocating for vulnerable and wronged populations and individuals.

It is probably an understatement to say society has changed rapidly over the last few decades. Changes in transportation, communication, as well as ideas such as diversity and postmodernism (in its various forms) have restructured how we as citizens go about our lives and how we relate to each other as citizens (Bloland, 2000; Kellner, 2019; Kincheloe, 2001). Suffice it to say that teaching citizenship is now extremely difficult and complex for social studies educators (Banks, McGee-Banks, & Clegg, 1999; Kuhn, Feliciano, & Kostikina, 2019). One pertinent

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concept derived from postmodernist thought which I think can help call attention to these changes Jean Baudrillard's (1994) notion of hyperreality (Kellner, 2019). In hyperreality, what is considered real has no origin. Rather, there is only simulacra and simulations. Simulacra do not represent an underlying truth, rather, they only represent themselves, and there are no referents anymore (Baudrillard, 1994; Kellner, 2019; Poster, 2001). Kellner (2019) asserts:

> The realm of the hyperreal (e.g., media simulations of reality, Disneyland and amusement parks, malls and consumer fantasylands, TV sports, and other excursions into ideal worlds) is more real than real, whereby the models, images, and codes of the hyperreal come to control thought and behavior.

Baudrillard (1994, 19) bluntly states that "the real is no longer possible" (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2018). A word of caution is in order for Baudrillard however. Kellner (2019) argues that Baudrillard should be read more as a "provocateur" of ideas rather than offering any concrete plans. Following Kellner, I use Baudrillard's idea not as a plan to pursue, but as a way to question and provoke change.

Hatch and Cunliffe (2018) utilize Baudrillard's ideas to examine organizational theory. As an example, they cite the practices of the now notorious Enron Corporation. Enron essentially created a simulacrum to hide its unethical practices. Enron created fake partnerships and set up fake offices (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2018). This was a simulacrum with no corresponding truth. Hatch and Cunliffe (2018) go on to note that although these types of unethical practices are not new to our age, they are becoming the norm. Further, Bloland, a higher education scholar also (2000) noted how hyperreality calls into question what is real.

Kincheloe (2001, 4) describes the hyperreal as a state with "so much input" from electronic media that the ability to make meaning may become difficult. He argues that social studies teachers in hyperreality must help their students understand signs and images, especially their political meanings (63). Kincheloe (2001) goes on to critique positivist thought and the supposition that there is one right answer, one uncontested immutable truth. Rather, there are a number of different ways of comprehending, multiple ways of seeing issues all of which offer some insight. We must transcend our limitations and examine our own thinking (and teachers must help students do this) to see these multiple frames.

If not "we are unprepared to meet the demand of citizenship in hyperreality" (Kincheloe, 2001, 270). In hyperreality, we must see beyond simple cause and effect thinking and embrace complexity and holism in the causation of events (587). The notion of bullshit is pertinent as well, it is a concept which really seems to epitomize the age we find ourselves in (Duncombe, 2019; Frankfurt, 2005). As Frankfurt (2005) argues, bullshitting is not lying. The honest man tells the truth, the liar knows the truth but chooses not to tell it. The bullshitter however has no regard for the truth, he just says whatever. The bullshitter is unconcerned with the truth, and that makes bullshit "a greater enemy of the truth than the lies are" (Frankfurt, 2005, 61). Plainly put, citizens have to wade through a good deal of bullshit (Drew, Lyons & Svehla, 2010). Illig (2020) notes how citizens are now just flooded with bullshit and misinformation. He (2020) argues that this is an age of "manufactured nihilism" where people stop seeking truth because it is too difficult and people are exhausted by the process. Moreover, Illig (2020) notes how this strategy is a deliberate one, for example by Steve Bannon and Vladimir Putin—it is meant to confuse and overwhelm people. Of course, while there are no doubt powerful individuals who influence the process, this is a systemic issue that goes beyond any individual, it is how media works now (Illig, 2020). Roberts (2017, 2019) similarly argues that we are facing an "epistemic crisis"—we just do not know what to believe. And in that confusion, people may simply drop out of the process or turn to a strong leader for security and order in the chaos. Needless to say, this does not bode well for democracy (Drew et al., 2010; Duncombe, 2019; Illig, 2020; Roberts, 2019).

So where does this all leave us as a society and as a republic? Should we resign ourselves to a state of uncertainty? A more productive route may be to embrace the notion of the ethical spectacle or dream. Duncombe (2019) suggests that the vaunted notions of scientific truth, derived from the Enlightenment, and so appealing to progressives, are outdated. Duncombe (2019, 18–19) points out that while there may not be a "Truth with a capital T" such as many of the Enlightenment thinkers envisioned, there are "small "t" truths," which have to be presented as "convincing" cases. The truth has to be told, it does not just appear (Duncombe, 2019). Duncombe (2019, 20) asserts:

> we need to learn how to tell the truth more effectively. It must have stories woven around it, works of art made about it…It must be embedded in an

> experience that connects with peoples dreams and desires, that resonates with symbols and myths they find meaningful.

What society wants, and what Duncombe (2019) argues that progressives need to adopt, is a politics of the ethical spectacle or the dream. The notion of spectacle can scare people however because it harkens back to the Nazis, as well as modern advertising (Duncombe, 2019). And both the Nazis and modern advertisers believe their spectacles to be ethical. So, for an ethical spectacle, Duncombe posits some parameters, such as realism but with an eye to changing reality, diversity, and nonhierarchical organization to name a few ideas. While these are abstract, they are at least a start (Duncombe, 2019). Ultimately, Duncombe (2019, xvii) calls for an ethical spectacle which is participatory and open which means that people must help to create it (unlike Nazi spectacles which were created by the government), and it must be adaptable and open to change. Further, ethical spectacles are always known to be a fantasy, but are grounded in real dynamics of power, and they allow participants to think of a better world (Duncombe, 2019). In contrast, Fascist spectacle was presented as the immutable and uncontestable truth (Duncombe, 2019). Some examples of ethical spectacles are the Zapatistas in Mexico and the "Billionaires for Bush" project. The Zapatistas make bold claims and put forth political dreams meant to inspire people, even if these dreams seem impossible (Duncombe, 2019). The Billionaires for Bush project saw people dressed up as mock billionaires and pretend to laud in a very public fashion what they saw as the corrupt policies of the Republicans (although they started out criticizing both parties), for instance, by holding a Million Billionaire March (Duncombe, 2019).

In a personal email, Duncombe (April 25, personal email communication) told me that ethical spectacles can do a number of things. They can unmask an existing truth (e.g., Rosa Parks unmasking racism) or they can help to point to a new reality that does not exist currently (e.g., Jesus' eating with pariahs to posit a new world where the first will be last). In his book (2019, 168) he notes that an ethical spectacle "must always root itself in the real," but can offer a dream (even if it cannot be realized) for people to work toward and to inspire people and bring them together. These dreams are meant to "inspire and guide" and not be the new reality (Duncombe, 2019, 169). Duncombe (2019, 174) again: "the ethical spectacle is the dream put on display. It is a dream that we can watch, think about, act within, try on for size, yet necessarily never